

Humor in Gender Tensions:
Character Impression Comedies by Women Creators on Douyin

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Abstract

This study analyzes the complex relationship between women's character impression comedy on Douyin and contemporary Chinese gender issues. Situated within a context of entrenched patriarchy and rising feminist awareness, the research views these popular short-video works as unique sites for negotiating gender tensions and claiming new discursive spaces.

Employing an integrated theoretical framework (combining social structure, humor regimes, and feminist theories), the thesis conducts case studies on women imitating both male and female subjects. The analysis reveals that the parody of the "greasy man" (youni nan, 油腻男) is a powerful social critique. Women creators dismantle masculine authority, transforming women's daily microaggressions into collective, empowering laughter. However, this empowerment is inherently ambivalent; its reliance on the ambiguity of humor allows it to bypass censorship while ultimately limiting its social transformative potential.

The imitation of women characters exposes a more complex ecosystem. Rather than focusing solely on critique, this mode allows for self-reflection and the portrayal of diverse women characters. Women creators have made many new attempts, such as shaping well-developed woman characters and creating women-centric narratives.

The conclusion posits that this digital humor is an ambivalent, everyday feminist practice. It affirms women's capacity for expression and community-building, but its scope is constrained by the very sociopolitical environment it critiques. This research offers insight into the complexities of humor, power, and gender struggle in a non-Western digital context.

Note on Translation and Terminology

In this thesis, for certain Chinese terminology, popular online expressions, and the names of artworks that lack a direct English equivalent, the pinyin form will be used, with the original Chinese characters annotated in parentheses, followed by an explanation of the corresponding English meaning. Where appropriate, popular online expressions and slang, along with captions and video titles, are translated into English as literally as possible and used directly in the main text, with the original Chinese text provided in parentheses for reference. For proper nouns like the names of television programs or companies, if an official English translation exists, that official name will be used directly in the text, accompanied by the original Chinese name in parentheses. However, longer texts like comments on social media and dialogue from comedic performances will be used as their direct English translation without including the original Chinese text in parentheses.

All terminology is either italicized or enclosed in quotation marks only at its first occurrence and appears in plain text without any special formatting thereafter.

Chinese and Japanese personal names are written in their original order, with the family name preceding the given name, in accordance with linguistic and cultural conventions. The original Chinese or Japanese characters will be provided upon the first appearance. This deliberate choice serves as a minor gesture of resistance to Western-centric norms.

All translations from Chinese and Japanese are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

In recent years, the rapid expansion of social networking sites and short-video platforms has provided ordinary users with new arenas for producing comedy and exchanging humor. On TikTok, one of the most extensively used short-video platforms worldwide, trends appear and circulate with remarkable speed. When a format or theme gains popularity, countless creators respond by producing videos with similar content, reinforcing the trend. As a result, people in different regions may simultaneously begin uploading clips that parody a Jet2 Holiday advertisement¹ or present themselves unboxing Labubu blind boxes.²

In mainland China, however, TikTok is inaccessible due to national firewall regulations. Its domestic equivalent is Douyin (抖音), which, like TikTok, is owned by ByteDance (字节跳动). The two platforms operate on the same underlying model, sharing core functions and interface design. Yet Douyin has never been released in overseas app stores, and it requires users to register with Chinese credentials and real-name verification,³ making it an almost entirely Chinese platform, described as a “lively island in isolation.” While Douyin’s trends

¹ In July 2025, an audio track from a long-running Jet2 Holiday advertisement went viral on TikTok, gaining new life as users set the sound to videos depicting vacation disasters or other unexpected moments. More than 1.4 million TikTok videos have used this audio. Source: Conor Murray, “The ‘Nothing Beats A Jet2 Holiday’ TikTok Trend, Explained—And How The Airline Capitalized On Viral Ad,” *Forbes*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2025/07/21/the-nothing-beats-a-jet2-holiday-tiktok-trend-explained-and-how-the-airline-capitalized-on-viral-ad/>.

² In the first half of 2025, Labubu, a furry gremlin figure designed by Hong Kong-born artist Kasing Lung and sold by Pop Mart in blind boxes, became popular on TikTok, where numerous unboxing videos contributed to its viral success. Source: Annabel Rackham, “Found on celebrity bags and in viral videos: The toy fashionistas are loving,” *BBC* online, April 20, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g92njen8o>.

³ Wang Chenchun, “Douyin wei kaifang haiwai zhuze, douyin fuzongcai: haiwai IP budaibiao haiwai yonghu [Douyin Has Not Opened Overseas Registration: Vice President States That an Overseas IP Address Does Not Necessarily Indicate an Overseas User, 抖音未开放海外注册, 抖音副总裁: 海外 IP 不代表海外用户],” *Nandu*, January 16, 2025, <https://m.mp.oeeee.com/a/BAAFRD0000202501161045164.html>.

rarely extend globally, the platform attracts more than 600 million daily active users and has generated distinctly Chinese memes, circulating jokes, and comedic innovations.⁴ In this way, Douyin functions as a site where humor deeply tied to Chinese cultural contexts is both produced and consumed.

Among the numerous popular formats, particular attention is given here to character impression comedy created by women. This genre has two defining dimensions. First, the videos present a unique style of short comedic performance. They rely on impersonation, exaggeration, and stylized delivery to humorously depict specific people, including celebrities and public figures, as well as widely recognized social roles, such as a demanding mother or a flirtatious colleague. The primary goal is to achieve comic effect through imitation, which distinguishes these works from simple copying without intent to entertain, or from videos where impressions serve only a minor function. The second dimension concerns authorship: the videos are made exclusively by women, who are responsible for the scripting, performance, and direction. This authorship is not incidental but integral to the voice and perspective of the videos. Therefore, videos featuring men on screen, or where male creators can be clearly identified within the core production team, are excluded from this thesis.

Although impression comedy is not a recent phenomenon in China,⁵ with a history ranging from mimicry in classical operas such as *Ta Yao Niang* (踏摇娘, the swinging lady)

⁴ Chen Yuxi, “Douyin: rihuo yonghu po 6 yi [Douyin: Daily Active Users Exceed 600 Million, 抖音: 日活跃用户破 6 亿],” *The Paper*, September 25, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9178948.

⁵ Zhang Qiankun, “Repeat, Imitation, Parody, Inversion: A Comparison of the Main Generative Methods of Comic Spirit Between China and the West,” *Yinshan Academic Journal* no. 3 (2021): 19.

of the Sui dynasty⁶ to modern television programs like *Your Face Sounds Familiar*,⁷ the character impression videos produced by women on Douyin represent a distinctive and innovative continuation within this long tradition.

From a structural viewpoint, Douyin character impression videos made by women are usually short in duration and present straightforward, easily understood plots and relationships. In contrast, both traditional Chinese comedic plays and contemporary variety shows emphasize makeup and costumes in order to reproduce the appearance of the impersonated figures as accurately as possible.⁸ These are also staged in theaters or broadcast on television, where performers remain at a distance from audiences, performance times are extended, and the shows are typically orchestrated with precision. By comparison, Douyin videos often look unpolished, with minimal attention to detailed makeup, elaborate clothing, or advanced editing. The performers resemble friends in casual gatherings who amuse others with playful impersonations. This approach suits the fast-paced media setting of the platform and simultaneously reduces barriers to entry, enabling ordinary users to become recognized creators, join popular trends, and even shift from amateurs into influencers. For instance, the impression creator Fang Touming (方头明) had accumulated 1.612 million followers by October 2025.⁹ Prior to releasing her first impersonation clip, she was simply an unknown internet user without any following.

⁶ This play humorously imitated the drunken antics of the heroine's husband.

⁷ The show is adapted from the Spanish television program *Tu cara me suena* and primarily features celebrities impersonating other celebrities.

⁸ Zhang Qiankun, "Repeat, Imitation, Parody, Inversion", 19.

⁹ Fang Touming (方头明, @abm_9091116), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/Litfv1tF7WY/>.

If the features noted above are those that all character impression comedy videos — regardless of the creator's gender — may exhibit, then the unique academic significance of these women-produced videos lies in their distinct gendered orientation. The variety of characters is notably broad, ranging from offensive male strangers encountered in everyday situations, to excessively controlling boyfriends, from women influencers reliant on wealthy husbands, to self-denying housewives, and even characters derived from television dramas. Yet despite this wide range of types, these performances are strongly marked by women's identities and speak directly from women's perspectives, engaging with women's lived realities, gender tensions, and the conflicts between growing feminist awareness and enduring misogynistic cultural expectations. However, this strong association with gender identity does not necessarily amount to an excessive performance of womanhood, a point that will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

This thesis contends that Douyin character impression videos created by women operate as more than popular entertainment. They form a cultural space in which gendered issues and conflicts are presented, embodied, and critically examined. At the same time, they express the contradictions, challenges, awakenings, and resilience of Chinese women within the ongoing development of feminist thought.

After presenting the literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, and a chapter outlining the history of women's involvement in Chinese comedy, this study turns to women-produced Douyin character impression videos. These are categorized according to their impersonation targets, either men or women, and analyzed in terms of content, stylistic features, and objectives. By examining the two categories, the study shows how these videos

confront and reflect ongoing gender issues, from responses to everyday sexism and toxic masculinity to portrayals of women's internal conflicts between feminist aspirations and entrenched social norms. From the perspective of authorship, the research considers why women participate so actively in creating and consuming this material, and what kinds of ideas and emotions are reflected in their authorship. Viewed through the lens of reception, it asks why these videos have become so popular, what they mean to women viewers, how these videos circulate and attract popularity despite strict censorship in China, why they provoke unease or even hostility among many male audiences, and how they have faced different forms of suppression or deletion. Exploring these questions leads to a broader inquiry into the cultural significance of these comedies and whether they contribute to addressing gender problems.

More broadly, the value of this research lies in its claim that these comedic performances represent a meaningful expression of grassroots cultural participation. By playfully dramatizing gendered behavior, they expose the hidden contours of gender conflict and render them open to critical engagement. In this sense, the thesis not only investigates how women-created character impression comedy on Douyin reflects current gender dynamics in China but also considers humor's function as a widely accessible medium. It asks whether humor simply mirrors social reality or also carries the potential to contest and transform it.

Literature Review

Three Key Models of Humor Studies

Humor and jokes are a fundamental part of human life, and humor has long been understood as more than light amusement or casual entertainment. This recognition has made it a subject deserving of serious academic inquiry. Humor studies is not a recent phenomenon; beginning in the post-Victorian era, three white male scholars developed influential modern frameworks for its study: Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Henri Bergson (1859-1941), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).¹⁰

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud argued that jokes represent the release of psychic energy usually devoted to maintaining social restraint, thereby producing psychological relief.¹¹ Humor, in his account, provides a temporary escape from the weight of prohibitions and taboos.¹² As Freud's associate Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933) noted, constructing social reality is laborious and requires constant effort; sustaining seriousness represses the self, while humor allows the mind to rest.¹³

Henri Bergson shared Freud's concern with the connection between humor and social norms, though his focus differed.¹⁴ In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*

¹⁰ Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, eds., *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 11.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1963), 97.

¹² *Ibid.*, 100–101.

¹³ Sándor Ferenczi, *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Michael Balint, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1955), 180.

¹⁴ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 11.

(1900), Bergson described comedy as the recognition of absurdity and incongruity.¹⁵ He suggested that comic figures embody particular social types, created to reveal human flaws that many people share.¹⁶ For Bergson, laughter functions as a corrective process. It disciplines individuals and contributes to social improvement.¹⁷ Yet, unlike Freud, who did not necessarily associate laughter with hostility, Bergson argued that laughter is rooted in hostility and stripped of benevolence.¹⁸ From this perspective, Bergson regarded humor and laughter as not only tools for satirizing human weakness and exposing social issues, but also as forces with a darker dimension that can be used for humiliation, revenge, and discrimination.¹⁹

Mikhail Bakhtin also emphasized the social force of humor, though he placed stronger weight on its capacity for subversion. He celebrated popular culture and placed particular value on the tradition of carnivalesque humor.²⁰ In his influential work *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin claimed that carnival laughter dismantles both sacred and secular authority, weakens prohibitions and hierarchies, and destabilizes the supposedly fixed structures of official ideology.²¹

Although Freud, Bergson, and Bakhtin emphasized different aspects of humor, they shared the view that humor conveys meanings beyond entertainment and remains closely tied

¹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911), trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Boston: IndyPublish, 2008), 197–98.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 12.

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 240.

to social norms, hierarchies, and urgent social questions. The ideas of these thinkers shaped later scholarship on humor. However, as white men—arguably the most privileged social group of their time—and given the limits of their historical context, they failed to account for women or other marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities or LGBTQ communities, as active participants in humor.²² Freud, a middle-class intellectual of the Edwardian period, tended to depict women, particularly those from the upper classes, mainly as the objects of jokes rather than as members of the audience, and rarely as joke tellers.²³ In the same way, Bergson assumed that humor was controlled by men, since women were regarded as lacking either the ability or the social standing to perform the corrective or humiliating tasks of comedy.²⁴ Likewise, Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque paid little attention to gender, overlooking the repression and regulation of women's bodies, as women could not readily enter the space of carnival freedom he imagined for the collective body.²⁵

The Rise of Feminist Humor Studies in the Twentieth Century

By the 1960s, building on the insights of Freud and Bergson, cultural theorist Mary Douglas further strengthened the link between humor and social structures from an anthropological perspective. In her essay *The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception* (1968), Douglas argued that jokes reveal incongruities within social

²² Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 10.

²³ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 97.

²⁴ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 13.

²⁵ Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

systems.²⁶ Specifically, jokes operate by setting one coherent structure against another that appears less relevant or inconsistent.²⁷ Although Douglas was a woman scholar, her theory did not emerge from a feminist orientation, nor did it directly engage with gender. Nonetheless, feminist researchers have found her work particularly valuable for examining humor in relation to gender conflicts. If jokes mirror underlying social contradictions, then humor about women — or produced by women — can be read as a way of negotiating tensions created by patriarchal norms and gender expectations.²⁸

Only after the 1980s did humor and comedy become established subjects of Western feminist scholarship, much later than other art forms. Early feminist analyses of humor often concentrated on literature, exploring the wit and irony in novels by women writers. At this stage, critics emphasized comedy's capacity to resist patriarchal authority, highlighting its anti-authoritarian dimension.²⁹ For instance, in *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (1983), English scholar Judy Little studied the role of humor in the works of Virginia Woolf, Muriel Spark, and Doris Lessing. She maintained that their wit and irony ridicule social conventions and help open possibilities for reshaping social structures.³⁰ Similarly, in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988), American cultural critic Nancy A. Walker examined the tradition of humor among American

²⁶ Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* 3, no. 3 (1968): 366.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

²⁸ Xiao Han and Giseline Kuipers, "Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown: Tensions of Gender and Care Faced by Chinese Mothers Working from Home," *China information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 398.

²⁹ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 14.

³⁰ Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 2.

women writers, stressing its feminist potential. Walker suggested that much of this humor functions either as a subtle challenge to prescribed gender roles or as a direct confrontation of them.³¹ These approaches extend Bergson's idea of comedy as corrective, while their optimism about the transformative capacity of women's humor echoes Bakhtin's celebration of laughter's subversive force.

After 1985, with the rapid growth and transformation of mass media, feminist scholarship increasingly turned to women's humor in stand-up comedy, television, film, and theater.³² Among these genres, stand-up comedy in particular received considerable critical focus. Scholars discussed both the marginal status of women comedians in the industry and the broader exclusion of women from humor and jokes. In 1985, psychologist Alice Sheppard argued that women's interest in comedy and their ability to create humor had long been repressed by stereotypes portraying women as humorless. Yet she also emphasized more positively that the number of women comedians was steadily expanding and that they were gaining public recognition.³³ In the early 1990s, Regina Barreca, drawing on her experiences performing in comedy clubs, published *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (1991). Extending the traditions of Bergson and Bakhtin, Barreca noted that women comedians create humor not by targeting the weak but by ridiculing the powerful, thus advancing the possibility of social change.³⁴ In her widely cited

³¹ Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.

³² Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 14.

³³ Alice Sheppard, "Funny Women: Social Change and Audience Response to Female Comedians," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 3, no. 2 (1985): 179–95.

³⁴ Regina Barreca, *Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991), 13–21.

1994 book *Women and Laughter*, feminist critic Frances Gray traced the stereotype of women's supposed lack of humor back to the seventeenth century, examining in detail how this myth functioned to police and marginalize women's voices.³⁵ At the same time, she stressed laughter's disruptive potential and argued for a more promising future for women's humor.³⁶ Furthermore, feminist critics in the 1990s began to identify recurring figures and modes in women's humor. For example, Kathleen Rowe analyzed the figure of the "unruly woman",³⁷ Lori Landay studied the female trickster,³⁸ and Pamela Robertson explored the dynamics of feminist camp humor.³⁹

Toward Diverse and Critical Approaches

As popular culture scholar Linda Mizejewski has noted, in the twenty-first century women's comedy has become an important arena for feminist discourse and representations of feminism.⁴⁰ At the same time, both feminist studies of humor and wider research on comedy and laughter have grown more precise, wide-ranging, and analytically critical. For example, in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (2014), Mizejewski argues that popular culture has historically positioned beauty and humor as mutually exclusive

³⁵ Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 8–12.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 43.

³⁸ Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 7.

³⁹ Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 12.

⁴⁰ Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 5.

qualities for women.⁴¹ Scholars such as Rebecca Krefting have situated feminist humor within the broader category of minority comedy, analyzing it in parallel with the humor of racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ communities.⁴²

From the early twenty-first century onward, however, the optimism that once characterized feminist scholarship about the transformative capacity of women's humor has increasingly been questioned. In *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (2004), women's studies scholar Joanne Gilbert, while recognizing that humor may generate certain social and psychological effects, expressed doubts about its subversive capacity. She argued that laughter does not necessarily foster political action. Instead, its playful and unserious qualities can dilute the strength of critique itself.⁴³ Moreover, the debate over whether humor carries corrective or subversive potential has become a recurring concern in humor studies more broadly, extending beyond feminist contexts. For instance, Dutch cultural scholars Ivo Nieuwenhuis and Dick Zijp argue that the overly positive framing of comedy as the ultimate antidote to authoritarianism requires revision.⁴⁴ Likewise, communication scholars Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius have criticized contemporary satire for both arising from and reinforcing a culture of cynicism.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁴³ Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 5.

⁴⁴ Ivo Nieuwenhuis and Dick Zijp, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour in an Age of Comic Controversy," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 349.

⁴⁵ Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 264.

This growing body of scholarship, which challenges the emancipatory promise and affirmative force of humor, has been described by Sharon Lockyer, founding director of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research (CCSR) at Brunel University London, as critical comedy/humor studies.⁴⁶ This approach not only questions optimistic views of humor's social role but also highlights its "darker side" and potential to cause harm, particularly in light of the increasing number of "humor scandals" and "comic controversies".⁴⁷ The most prominent examples include the 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which provoked global protests and violent clashes, and the 2015 terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* following the magazine's satirical depictions of Islam.⁴⁸ As Nieuwenhuis and Zijp emphasize, while humor often creates ambiguity that complicates interpretation of a speaker's intentions, this does not mean humor is without limits or incapable of harm.⁴⁹ Critical humor studies therefore seek to analyze both the causes and consequences of these conflicts and harms. Beyond race and religion, questions of gender, politics, and other socially sensitive issues have also been central to this research. In particular, scholars have examined how comedy intersects with social hierarchies and the construction of cultural identity. For example, Nieuwenhuis and Zijp conceptualize humor as a cultural practice embedded within systems of hierarchy and power relations.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 346.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Holm, "'Against the Assault of Laughter': Differentiating Critical and Resistant Humour," in *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance*, ed. K.B.R. Giappone, Frances Francis, and Iain MacKenzie (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 31; Giseline Kuipers, "The Sociology of Humor," in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 361; Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour," 346.

⁴⁸ Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour," 344.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 349.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 347.

Giselinde Kuipers, one of the most prominent figures in critical humor studies, emphasizes the dynamics between those who mock and those who are mocked. She argues that humor can reinforce existing hierarchies and sustain dominant discourses, thereby making resistance more difficult for marginalized groups.⁵¹ Similarly, Nicholas Holm investigates the relationship between humor and dignity in the public sphere, demonstrating that groups positioned lower in the social hierarchy are particularly vulnerable to having their dignity eroded through humor.⁵² Critical humor studies can be understood as both an extension and revision of Bergson's claim that humor originates in hostility and malice. Contemporary scholars, by examining social conflicts sparked by humor and jokes, continue a distant dialogue with Bergson's recognition of humor's dual nature articulated more than a century ago.

Another major development in humor studies in the twenty-first century has been the increasing attention to digital humor, including internet memes, humorous posts circulated on platforms such as X (Twitter) and Instagram, and, as in the case of this thesis, various forms of humorous video online. For instance, Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman examined different categories of memes across countries following Donald Trump's election as U.S. president;⁵³ Nicholas Holm analyzed the dynamics of online deadpan humor;⁵⁴ and Giselinde

⁵¹ Giselinde Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere: Cartoons, Power and Modernity in the First Transnational Humour Scandal," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2011): 69.

⁵² Nicholas Holm, "Humour Versus Dignity in the Public Sphere," *The European Journal of Humour Research* 12, no.1 (2024): 42.

⁵³ Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, "Laughing Alone, Together: Local-User-Generated Satirical Responses to a Global Event," *Information, Communication & Society*, 2022, 924-41.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Holm, "Deadpan Humour, the Comic Disposition and the Interpretation of Ironic Ambiguity Online," *New Media & Society* 26, no.1 (2024): 253–70.

Kuipers together with Xiao Han studied TikTok videos produced by mothers working from home.⁵⁵

The Neglect of Chinese Humor in Scholarship

Humor studies in the West have developed into a relatively structured field, with a long intellectual history and broad applications to contemporary issues and case studies. Yet the field remains heavily Western-centric, even down to the present day.

Kuipers has stressed the importance of cultural specificity in humor studies, noting that what counts as humorous material and what qualifies as “good” humor differs across national and cultural contexts.⁵⁶ The embeddedness of humor in local power relations reveals a major limitation in the field: its overwhelming concentration on Western, and especially Anglophone, contexts. For example, in their discussion of the politics of humor, Nieuwenhuis and Zijp explicitly restrict their scope to the Global North, excluding the Global South, including China. (In practice, even countries often associated with the Global North but non-English-speaking, such as Japan and South Korea, are also absent from their analysis).⁵⁷ This gap necessitates an intentional broadening of scholarly focus toward non-Western contexts, including China’s dynamic and distinctive online humor culture, in order to test, refine, and potentially challenge existing models. Studying humor on a platform like Douyin, separated by the Great Firewall and shaped by its own cultural and political logics, is not simply an

⁵⁵ Han and Kuipers, “Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown”, 393-419.

⁵⁶ Giseline Kuipers, “The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere,” 68.

⁵⁷ Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, “The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour,” 341.

additional case study. It represents a necessary step toward a more genuinely global understanding of how humor functions in the twenty-first century.

In China, humor research is not absent, yet it remains fragmented and has not developed into a coherent academic tradition. Chinese scholars have examined humor in literature, such as Gao Shenglin (高胜林)'s *Youmo xiuci lun* (幽默修辞论, *On the Rhetoric of Humor*),⁵⁸ which analyzes humor in literary works through the lens of language and rhetoric. There are also specialized studies of traditional comedic forms, including Liu Qing (刘庆)'s *Shanghai huaji shi* (上海滑稽史, *A History of Shanghai Comedy*) and Jiang Kun (姜昆)⁵⁹ with Dai Hongsen (戴洪森)'s edited volume *Zhongguo quyi gailun* (中国曲艺概论, *An Introduction to Chinese Folk Art Forms*),⁶⁰ which trace the historical development of *huaji* drama (滑稽戏) and *Xiangsheng* (相声). While these works are informative, they tend to be descriptive rather than theoretical, and they rarely situate a genre within the wider discipline of humor or comedy studies. In recent years, modern comedic forms such as variety shows and stand-up comedy have begun to draw academic interest. For instance, Zheng Shi (郑石) and Zhang Shaogang (张绍刚), both television hosts and communication scholars, analyzed the development of Chinese television programs featuring stand-up comedy,⁶¹ while Xue Jing

⁵⁸ Gao Shenglin, *Youmo xiuci lun* [*On the Rhetoric of Humor*, 幽默修辞论] (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 2006).

⁵⁹ Liu Qing, *Shanghai huaji shi* [*A History of Shanghai Comedy*, 上海滑稽史] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2011).

⁶⁰ Jiang Kun and Dai Hongsen, eds., *Zhongguo quyi gailun* [*An Introduction to Chinese Folk Art Forms*, 中国曲艺概论] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005).

⁶¹ Zhang Shaogang and Zheng Shi, "Dankou xijulei jiemu de gainian bianxi ji wenhua sibian [A Cultural Critique of Chinese Stand-Up Comedy Shows, "单口喜剧"类节目的概念辨析及文化思辨]," *Literature and Art Criticism* 8 (2017), 108-113.

(雪静) explored the discourse of women in Chinese stand-up comedy.⁶² Yet these studies are often short in scope, fragmented in perspective, and limited in theoretical depth. In addition, research on digital humor—such as internet memes and short videos, genres frequently regarded as informal or trivial—has been carried out mainly in master’s theses written by younger scholars. This pattern suggests that such work remains confined to student projects and has not yet received systematic or rigorous attention from the broader academic community. Overall, humor research in China lacks a comprehensive intellectual framework and has not matured into an independent field. Furthermore, it seldom engages with Western theories of humor, reflecting a degree of insularity.

This thesis seeks to address these gaps by placing Chinese humor—specifically women-created character impression comedy on Douyin—within the broader landscape of humor studies. The analysis centers on Douyin, a Chinese short-video platform that remains relatively inaccessible to Western audiences, and highlights an emerging creative trend that is still developing and widely popular. By examining this underexplored form of women-created comedy on Douyin, and by applying feminist and cultural humor studies to this distinctly Chinese context, the research demonstrates how these digital practices shed light on contemporary gender tensions. It brings Chinese perspectives into dialogue with Western theories while contributing to a more global understanding of humor.

⁶² Xue Jing, “Tan nǚxing yu nǚxing huayu: tuokouxu yu nǚxing huayu de zhuanxing [“Talking about Female” and “Female Speech”: The Talk Show and the Transformation of Female Discourse, “谈女性”与“女性话语”: 脱口秀与女性话语的转型],” *Arts Criticism* 1 (2022), 100-111.

Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud regarded humor as a release from social constraints, Henri Bergson emphasized its corrective role in society, and Mikhail Bakhtin recognized its capacity for subversion. From these foundational models to more recent feminist and critical humor studies, scholars have consistently acknowledged the social, political, and serious dimensions of humor.⁶³ There is broad agreement within humor studies that humor is closely tied to social structures and norms. Building on this consensus, the analysis in this thesis argues that women-created character impression comedy on Douyin is not simply a source of laughter but is deeply embedded in its social context, engaging with China's systems of power, hierarchies, and gender tensions.

In discussions about the connection between humor and social structure, Mary Douglas's theory of "incongruity," together with concepts from critical humor studies that situate humor within social hierarchies and power dynamics (most notably Giseline Kuipers's idea of "humor regimes") form a central part of the framework for this thesis. Douglas argued that when something becomes the object of humor, it indicates an incongruity within the social structure, specifically when a dominant relational pattern is challenged by another.⁶⁴ For Douglas, humor cannot be separated from the cultural rules and norms that it either affirms or temporarily destabilizes. Her framework therefore provides an essential foundation for examining how humor both reproduces and contests gendered power

⁶³ Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour," 343.

⁶⁴ Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition," 366.

relations. Emerging forms of humor often register the clash between older and newer ideas, signaling that established social structures are undergoing change.

While Douglas stressed universality, Kuipers placed greater emphasis on humor's cultural specificity.⁶⁵ As Douglas observed, people frequently joke about social tensions, so themes marked by contradictions—such as race, gender, politics, and hierarchy—often serve as material for humor across the world.⁶⁶ Kuipers adds that although certain themes may recur universally, humor and jokes are usually shaped by the particular time, place, language, and culture in which they are produced.⁶⁷

According to Han Xiao and Giseline Kuipers, humorous expressions gain traction when they resonate with local sensitivities and cultural understandings, meaning that a joke spreads and becomes popular only if audiences broadly recognize and identify with the social tensions it conveys.⁶⁸ Humor thus reflects the tensions of specific moments and contexts, showing how those tensions are formed and shift over time. This thesis argues that the insights of Douglas and Kuipers on humor within social structures remain highly relevant to the latest trends on Douyin, whose popularity rests on their engagement with social contradictions, opposing viewpoints, and evolving norms. It therefore examines which gender tensions women's impression comedy reflects. In line with Kuipers's insistence on cultural and social specificity, this thesis situates the discussion of humorous short videos within the concrete context of contemporary China.

⁶⁵ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 68.

⁶⁶ Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition," 366.

⁶⁷ Xiao Han and Giseline Kuipers, "Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown," 398.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Given that humor is tied to particular social contexts, it is never completely free but constrained by the social norms and power hierarchies of its time and place. Douglas noted that a joke may be judged by social standards as improper, risky, in poor taste, or too close to the edge. Put differently, humor is regulated by hierarchy and cultural values.⁶⁹ Kuipers extended Douglas's idea through her theory of "humor regimes." She argues that humor and satire are governed by "humor regimes," which stipulate who is entitled to joke about what.⁷⁰ Shaped by power relations, these regimes establish social boundaries, define what is off-limits, and grant some greater rights to joke-telling than others.⁷¹ Kuipers also emphasizes that groups in weaker positions within power structures face obstacles when "joking back," since such resistance requires access, influence, and social resources.⁷²

Kuipers draws attention to the unequal dynamics between those who produce humor and those who become its targets. To be laughed at often signals exclusion or marginalization—or, as Nicholas Holm explains, a loss of dignity—while comedians and joke-tellers are usually situated on the stronger side of the hierarchy. This thesis applies the theory of humor regimes to women-created character impression comedy, analyzing both the creators and the objects of humor. Communication scholars Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish demonstrate that for centuries women were cast as passive targets of ridicule, with sexist humor deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions.⁷³ Historically, women were not only placed as the butt of jokes but also

⁶⁹ Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition," 366.

⁷⁰ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 69.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 74.

⁷³ Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, "Between Feminism and Fun(ny)ism: Analysing Gender in Popular Internet Humour," *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 6 (2010): 872.

excluded from being comedians, creators, or even recognized audience members. They were frequently perceived as lacking a sense of humor, while feminist critiques of sexist jokes were dismissed as evidence of “not getting the joke”.⁷⁴

On Douyin, however, humorous short videos produced and performed by women disrupt this entrenched pattern by enabling women to become active agents of comedy. At the same time, the objects of ridicule include both men and women. Humor regimes have therefore shifted, though traces of earlier structures persist. This thesis examines what these dynamics suggest about gender relations in contemporary Chinese society, focusing on both transformation and continuity. The framework of humor regimes is also used to investigate how this form of humor is received, not only by general audiences but also by state authorities, especially when videos are criticized, reported, or censored.

This thesis also engages with the long-standing academic debate over whether humor necessarily carries subversive force. It adopts the framework of critical humor studies as its interpretive lens, acknowledging that humor can generate positive effects, contribute to social progress, and influence cultural attitudes, but it should not be viewed as a cure-all or decisive means for dismantling existing social orders.⁷⁵ The analysis here examines the degree to which humor can shape discourse when produced and circulated in contexts where freedom of expression is relatively limited, such as mainland China. The study follows this guiding question, first posed by humor scholar Christie Davies: is humor a thermostat, regulating, correcting, and occasionally subverting social dynamics, or is it a thermometer that merely

⁷⁴ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 3.

⁷⁵ Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, “The Politics and Aesthetics of Humour,” 349.

reflects conditions without driving change, or perhaps something in between?⁷⁶ Within the scope of this thesis, the central issue is whether women-led humor, including character impression comedy, has the capacity to offer an effective challenge to patriarchal structures and misogynistic ideologies.

Another relevant framework for analyzing women-created character impression comedy videos is relief theory, which originates in Freud's work and extends into contemporary critical humor scholarship. Han and Kuipers argue that humor and jokes provide playful relief for people facing social tensions, even when "things will not change much".⁷⁷ Although humor may not be revolutionary or fully subversive, it gives individuals a way to manage negative emotions such as anger and fear.⁷⁸ Academic debates on the relief function of humor often stress its ambiguity. Social scientists Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman suggest that humor offers a "free space" for coping with difficult emotions because "forbidden urges" can be expressed through humor in socially acceptable ways, permitting indirect resistance to authority.⁷⁹ Open debate or sharp criticism of sensitive issues is often restricted or prohibited, particularly in conservative settings where freedom of expression is constrained.

Humor, however, can sometimes serve as an exception due to its ambiguous and unserious character. Sociologist Michael Mulkay argues that humorous statements cannot be taken literally or translated directly into arguments, which is why humor is generally kept

⁷⁶ Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 248.

⁷⁷ Xiao Han and Giseline Kuipers, "Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown," 398.

⁷⁸ Michael Sliter et al., "Is Humor the Best Medicine? The Buffering Effect of Coping Humor on Traumatic Stressors in Firefighters," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 35, no. 2 (2014), 257.

⁷⁹ Nissenbaum and Shifman, "Laughing Alone, Together," 926.

separate from serious discourse.⁸⁰ Paradoxically, this very separation enables humor to address pressing social tensions.⁸¹ Relief theory maintains that jokes and humor, while unable to initiate revolutions, can still facilitate discussion of sensitive concerns. They allow individuals to express suppressed feelings and help alleviate negative emotions. This thesis applies relief theory to explore how the trend of women's impression comedy on Douyin functions as a mode of relief. It also investigates whether women creators possess greater freedom to address gender tensions through humorous expression compared with more serious forms of discourse.

Furthermore, this thesis's discussion and analysis of gender discrimination and gender tension are informed by the works of feminist scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Ueno Chizuko, particularly through the repeated use of the concept of misogyny. In a patriarchal society structured by gender binaries and heterosexual hegemony, misogyny is pervasive.⁸² Among men, it manifests as contempt for women; among women, it appears as self-loathing.⁸³ Heterosexual men's so-called "love for women" is, in essence, a desire for the feminine symbol rather than for real women.⁸⁴ They treat women as resources and objects to be possessed. Within a misogynistic society, women, consciously or unconsciously, may also internalize misogyny, developing aversion toward themselves and other women. Competition among women for male approval is often framed through stereotypes of jealousy and rivalry. Sedgwick's concept of "homosocial desire", which distinguishes social bonds between men

⁸⁰ Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, 12.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī* [Misogyny: Japan's Misogyny, 女ざらい: ニッポンのミソジニー], trans. Wang Lan (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2015), 2.

⁸³ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

from sexual desire, provides an important framework here.⁸⁵ In patriarchal systems, men form strong alliances through the shared goal of controlling women, and such homosocial bonds are celebrated as brotherhood or solidarity.⁸⁶ In contrast, friendships between women are denied or rendered invisible, as patriarchy assumes that women cannot coexist harmoniously.⁸⁷ Just as Sedgwick applied this theoretical lens to English literature and Ueno Chizuko to Japanese literature, their ideas remain illuminating for analyzing contemporary Chinese comedy. In addition, this thesis refers to and applies various other feminist concepts, such as “precarious manhood” and “the second sex”, which will be discussed in detail in the analytical sections that follow.

Therefore, by synthesizing Douglas’s social-structural lens, Kuipers’s culturally specific concept of humor regimes, and the critical humor studies perspective on humor’s subversive and relief functions, inspired by different feminist ideas, this thesis establishes a comprehensive theoretical foundation. This integrated framework will guide the analysis of women-created character impression comedy on Douyin. It shifts the question from whether this humor is simply subversive to how it operates within China’s digital and socio-political environment. The analysis examines which gender tensions it reflects, what new discursive positions it opens for women, and how its ambiguous qualities both enable expression and invite regulation. In doing so, this study demonstrates how digital practices in a non-Western context both resonate with and challenge established theoretical models of humor and power.

⁸⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojini*, 191.

Background: Chinese Women Comedians' Road to a Seat at the Table

This thesis examines character impression comedy videos produced by women on Douyin. Writing in English, I am aware that Chinese comedy is relatively unfamiliar to many Western readers, some of whom may never have encountered it. For this reason, one chapter is dedicated to offering the necessary background. The history of comedy in China has developed along a path that both diverges from and overlaps with its Western counterpart. Chinese comedy cannot therefore be assumed to fit frameworks largely shaped by Western, especially English-language, traditions. This chapter restricts its discussion to conventional public venues for humor, including television variety shows and stage performances in theaters. By tracing how gendered humor has evolved in these mainstream contexts, and how women have been represented or excluded, a basis is created for understanding the later growth of digital comedy on platforms such as Douyin.

It is important to recognize that women's participation in telling jokes and producing comedy has not been a given. Han and Kuipers observe that a longstanding stereotype across many societies claims women are not naturally humorous, making it difficult for them to become creators of comedy. As a consequence, humor frequently functions to reinforce gender dominance and gendered ideologies.⁸⁸ Jokes and comic forms in patriarchal societies have long been governed by particular systems of humor, which means women have not only been excluded from producing comedy but have also been positioned as recurring targets of mockery.

⁸⁸ Han and Kuipers, "Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown," 399.

In China, the pattern is much the same. The major traditional comedy genres in China are entrenched in patriarchal and misogynistic culture, with the result that women have been marginalized within comedic practice. Women are often excluded entirely, and when they do participate, it is typically through roles that sustain sexist tropes. Xiangsheng, which emerged in the 19th century, is a representative form of traditional Chinese comedy. It is commonly staged as a quick, playful exchange between two performers, rich in puns, cultural references, and verbal artistry.⁸⁹ Xiangsheng originated as a form of entertainment meant to kill the time in teahouses and taverns.⁹⁰ Xiangsheng first developed as a pastime designed to fill idle hours in teahouses and taverns.⁹¹ From its inception, therefore, Xiangsheng was a comic art created by men and performed primarily for men.

Although Xiangsheng often includes satirical commentary on social issues, its routines frequently depend on vulgar humor and sexist material, which was likely what the mixed audiences in teahouses and taverns expected.⁹² A common theme is mocking another performer's wife. In certain sketches, one performer repeatedly suggests that he has had sexual relations with his partner's wife. A well-known example of this type of humor is the routine *Tuo Qi Xian Zi* (托妻献子), roughly translated as "Entrusting One's Wife and Offering One's Son".⁹³ The piece tells the story of a man who, before leaving on a long

⁸⁹ Zhang Tong and Zhou Kaiyuan, "Fun Young Ladies — Modern Feminism and China's Stand-up Comedy," *Women's Studies International Forum* 99 (2023): 3.

⁹⁰ Hou Baolin, et al., *Xiangsheng suyuan* [*The Origin of Cross Talk*, 相声溯源] (Beijing: Journal of Peking University, 1980), 19.

⁹¹ Zhang and Zhou, "Fun Young Ladies", 3.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Wojiushigemazide (我就是个码字的), "Xiangshengjie de daxiaohua, Guodegang de Tuoqixianzi daodi shanghai le shui? [The Crosstalk World's Big Joke: Who Did Guo Degang's Entrusting One's Wife and

journey, asks his friend to look after his wife and son, only for the friend to marry the wife and take the son as his own. Within this structure, one performer often adds crude jokes focused on possessing or sharing the other performer's wife.⁹⁴ For example, in a version by the celebrated Xiangsheng artist Zhang Shouchen (张寿臣), the dialogue proceeds as follows.

A: What do you sleep on and cover yourself with?

B: I sleep on a blue mattress and cover myself with a red quilt.

A: I also sleep on a blue mattress and cover myself with a red quilt.

...

A: And who do you sleep with at night?

B: My wife and I—just the two of us.

A: I sleep with your wife too!⁹⁵

The exchange reveals that the essence of the joke lies in reducing women to objects, presenting the wife as a possession that can be lent, swapped, or reclaimed at will. This vulgar imagining of female infidelity builds on the stereotype that women are scheming, motivated by unstable desires, and inclined toward betrayal. At the same time, it reinforces cultural expectations of female chastity and the male aspiration to dominate women. As early as 1939, this routine was condemned within the Xiangsheng community for its indecency and

Offering One's Son Actually Hurt? 相声界的大笑话，郭德纲的《托妻献子》到底伤害了谁?]", Wangyi, November 21, 2021, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GPBR62NN05376S8M.html>.

⁹⁴ Zhang Shouchen, *Zhongguo chuantong Xiangsheng daquan Vol.5* [*The Complete Collection of Traditional Chinese Xiangsheng Vol.5*, 中国传统相声大全第五卷], ed. Liu Yingnan (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 2011), 242-247.

⁹⁵ Zhang Shouchen, *Zhongguo chuantong Xiangsheng daquan Vol.5*, 235.

was seen as a piece needing revision or elimination.⁹⁶ Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, cultural officials further criticized it as outdated and politically unsuitable⁹⁷

Even so, the piece remained in circulation, and as recently as 2020, it was still performed by De Yun She (德云社), China's most influential Xiangsheng troupe.⁹⁸ To this day, as feminist scholars Zhang and Zhou have observed, although the audience for Xiangsheng now includes women as well as men, its themes continue to primarily convey a male viewpoint.⁹⁹

In terms of performers, Xiangsheng has historically been almost entirely male-dominated, with very few women participating. Some prominent Xiangsheng clubs and organizations, such as De Yun She, openly declare that they do not recruit women comedians. During a live-streamed recruitment event in 2020, Guo Degang (郭德纲), the founder of Deyunshe, and member Luan Yunping (栾云平) told the women in the audience that they lacked the capacity to train girls and advised that they pursue other careers rather than waste their time there.¹⁰⁰ In another interview, Guo Degang suggested that women were unsuited to Xiangsheng, remarking, "It is very difficult for girls to perform Xiangsheng on stage," while

⁹⁶ Yin Wenshuo and Wang Jue, *Xiangsheng hangnei yiwen* [Anecdotes from the Xiangsheng World, 相声行内轶闻] (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1988), 5.

⁹⁷ Zhongguo Quyi Zhi Quanguo Bianji Weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo quyi zhi: Beijing juan* [Annals of Chinese Folk Performing Arts: Beijing Volume, 中国曲艺志·北京卷] (Beijing: Zhongguo ISBN Chubanshe, 2009), 199.

⁹⁸ Gao Feng and Yu Qian, "Tuo Qi Xian Zi [Entrusting One's Wife and Offering One's Son, 托妻献子]", YOUKU, May 31, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cCjy3i5iLA>.

⁹⁹ Zhang and Zhou, "Fun Young Ladies", 3.

¹⁰⁰ Guo Xiao, "Deyunshe weihe bushou nütudi [Why Doesn't De Yun She Accept Female Disciples? Guo Degang: Out of Respect, 德云社为何不收女徒弟? 郭德纲: 因为尊重]", The Paper, December 22, 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_10488890.

stressing that this was not intended as discrimination but rather expressed as a form of respect.¹⁰¹

The Xiangsheng industry also adheres to a strict master-apprentice system rooted in traditional Chinese performance culture. Within this structure, new entrants must formally *Baishi* (拜师), ritually becoming disciples of senior performers, to receive instruction and gain access to performance opportunities. This hierarchical model, built on loyalty, obedience, and male lineage, reflects the values of a traditional patriarchal order. It simultaneously fosters an exclusive environment with a high barrier to entry, which limits participation from outsiders. Consequently, it is especially difficult for women comedians and for humor that conveys a woman's perspective to achieve visibility in Xiangsheng.

Beyond Xiangsheng, sketch comedy, or *Xiaopin* (小品), represents another widely popular form of comedic performance in China. Characterized by short storylines and humorous dialogue, it was first introduced in the 1984 *Spring Festival Gala*,¹⁰² a nationally televised variety show held annually on the eve of Chinese New Year. Although sketch comedy has a shorter history than Xiangsheng, it quickly rose to become one of the most mainstream comic forms in China because of the Gala's broad reach. As Zhang and Zhou note, sketch comedy has in part provided Chinese women comedians with a channel for breaking the silence surrounding women's participation in comedy.¹⁰³ Given its emphasis on everyday life situations, women performers were included, and some went on to achieve

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² The *Spring Festival Gala*: It is broadcast annually on the eve of Chinese New Year on the primary channel of the China Central Television. The gala includes music, dance, comedy, and drama performances. It has become a ritual for many Chinese families to watch the gala in the Spring Festival.

¹⁰³ Zhang and Zhou, "Fun Young Ladies", 3.

national recognition, including Gao Xiumin (高秀敏), Song Dandan (宋丹丹), Ma Li (马丽), and Jia Ling (贾玲). These comedians were regulars at the Spring Festival Gala, and their lines in sketch performances often evolved into widely known catchphrases.

For instance, Song Dandan appeared in sketch comedies on the Gala nine times, four of which featured her in the recognizable role of the rural elder woman Baiyun (白云).¹⁰⁴ In a 1999 sketch, Baiyun joked that while herding sheep for the production team (生产队, shengchandu),¹⁰⁵ she used the opportunity to knit a sweater for her husband, only to be criticized by her supervisor as “pulling the wool of socialism’s sheep (薅社会主义羊毛, hao shehuizhuyi yangmao)”.¹⁰⁶ Since then, the phrase “haoyangmao” (薅羊毛, literally “to pull wool”) has become a common Chinese expression referring to opportunistic actions meant to gain small personal advantages. This illustrates that some well-known women performers achieved considerable influence in mainstream Chinese comedy and earned widespread recognition among audiences.

Even so, this did not result in women comedians attaining equal standing with their male peers. Within sketch comedy, women are still often positioned as the subject of sexist humor. As discussed above, Baiyun is usually portrayed as a loud, vain, and opportunistic rural woman. Song Dandan, though still in middle age, transformed into an elderly woman with a

¹⁰⁴ “Zhongguo guangbo dianshi zongtai chunjie lianhuan wanhui huigu 1983-2024 (A Collection of Past Spring Festival Galas 1983-2024, 中央广播电视总台春节联欢晚会回顾 1983-2024)”, *CCTV Gala*, playlist, <https://www.youtube.com/@CCTVGala/featured>.

¹⁰⁵ Production team: the basic unit of rural collective organization in China during the People's Commune era (1958–1983). It was responsible for organizing agricultural labor, managing land use, and distributing resources among villagers under a collective system.

¹⁰⁶ Song Dandan, et al., “Zuotian jintian mingtian [Yesterday Today and Tomorrow, 昨天今天明天]”, *CCTV Gala*, December 25, 2013, video, 9:46-10:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5qr1jQ1M0E>.

missing front tooth through makeup (as figure 1). In contrast, her husband Heitu (黑土), played by Zhao Benshan (赵本山), is represented as kind, honest, and simple-minded. Baiyun is instead cast as a negative character who serves as a foil and a target of derision. Her eagerness to show off and seek social approval frequently creates tension in her marriage and becomes the main source of comedy. Another performer who also appeared on the Spring Festival Gala nine times was Gao Xiumin. She was plump, wore clothing styled after rural Chinese aesthetics, and was likewise cast as shrewd and greedy rural women, usually in the role of the male character's wife. Such women roles are typically presented as unattractive in appearance and negative in disposition and morality. In addition to sustaining harmful stereotypes about rural women, these portrayals confine women characters to household-centered roles.

Before 2010, rural women characters were more common in Chinese sketch comedy.



Figure 1. Song Dandan (right) as Baiyun in the sketch, performed with Zhao Benshan. Source: Song Dandan and Zhao Benshan, et al., “Zuotian jintian mingtian,” CCTV Gala, December 25, 2013, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5qr1jQ1M0E>.

After 2010, with the advance of urbanization in China, portrayals of modern urban women began to appear more frequently on stage, and the variety of women roles expanded. For example, in the 2010 Spring Festival Gala, actress Niu Li (牛莉) played Lili, a fashionable and cheerful young woman with curled hair and a pink coat. Yet gender bias persisted. Several performances in the 2015 Spring Festival Gala stand out as notorious examples. One sketch adopted a musical format to contrast actresses Qu Ying (瞿颖) and Jia Ling. Qu Ying, who is tall and conventionally attractive, was labeled “nūshen (女神, a goddess)” while Jia Ling was depicted as “nūhanzi (女汉子, a manly woman)” because she was not slim or elegant, implying that she lacked feminine charm and would struggle to find a husband.¹⁰⁷

Another sketch depicted unmarried women over 30 as undesirable or second-hand,¹⁰⁸ and another implied that women officials could gain promotion through sexual relationships with male leaders.¹⁰⁹ These performances received widespread criticism from feminists after they were broadcast, with the content described as “spectacularly misogynistic”.¹¹⁰ In response, an online campaign opposing gender discrimination in the show rapidly collected 1,300 signatures before being blocked by censors.¹¹¹ As a national event produced by China Central

¹⁰⁷ Jia Ling, et al., “Xile jie [Happy Street, 喜乐街]”, CCTV Gala, December 28, 2015, video, 4:50-6:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMI8gv5-628>.

¹⁰⁸ Feng Gong, et al., “Xiaomian’ao [Little Cotton-padded Jacket, 小棉袄]”, CCTV Gala, December 28, 2015, video, 8:50-10:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-K-rFDHsNs>.

¹⁰⁹ Shen Teng, et al., “Touqi suohao [Cater to Someone’s Preferences, 投其所好]”, CCTV Gala, December 28, 2015, video, 3:41-3:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al-T1vuNF4s>

¹¹⁰ Fu Yiqin, “China’s TV Spectacular Was Spectacularly Misogynistic,” *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/20/chinas-tv-spectacular-misogyny-body-shame-sex-harassment-not-funny/>.

¹¹¹ Simon Denyer and Xu Yangjingjing, “China’s Feminists Stand up Against ‘Misogynistic’ TV Gala,” *The Washington Post Online*, February 25, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/02/25/chinas-feminists-stand-up-against-misogynistic-tv-gala/>.

Television, the Spring Festival Gala functions as a central mouthpiece of the state, employing its broad reach and cultural authority to project official values and advance government-sanctioned narratives. For this reason, the misogynistic content in its sketches is viewed as reflecting the state's gender-discriminatory position, transforming artistic critique into a political issue.¹¹²

Traditional Chinese comedy is either grounded in patriarchal norms or shaped by a strong official tone, which makes its gender-discriminatory elements persistent and resistant to change. Women comedians have historically had few chances, lacking both influence over performances and independence in selecting material for the stage. Still, this circumstance has improved somewhat with the rise of stand-up comedy in China. Although stand-up comedy dates back about a century,¹¹³ it has gained popularity in China only within the past decade. The first Chinese stand-up clubs were created in 2009, at a time when few in China had even heard of the form.¹¹⁴ Since then, several major cities have developed their own venues, fostering a growing number of stand-up performers. Well-known television programs also helped expand its audience, including *Tonight Post-80s Talk Show* (今晚八零后脱口秀) and especially *Rock & Roast* (脱口秀大会). Since its launch in 2017, each season of *Rock & Roast* has attracted billions of views and stimulated extensive social media discussion.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Eddie Tafoya, *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form* (Boca Raton: Brown Walker Press, 2009), 85-148.

¹¹⁴ Liu Jiajia, "Stand-up Has Legs in China," *China Daily* Online, October 5, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/05/WS633cc9aca310fd2b29e7b03f.html>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

As stand-up gradually became popular in China, the number of male comedians far exceeded that of women. Although the format was relatively new, jokes ridiculing women remained common, often relying on stereotypes portraying women as impulsive and irrational. In the first season of *Rock & Roast*, comedians Siwen (思文) and Chen Xiaojing (陈晓靖) were the only two women among 21 contestants.¹¹⁶ Guest performer Liu Yan (柳岩), a well-known actress noted for her figure, was repeatedly subjected to jokes from male contestants about her body.¹¹⁷ The shift came in the landmark third season of *Rock & Roast* in 2020. In that season, Yang Li (杨笠), appearing for the second time, did not win the title but emerged as the most prominent woman contestant.

In her routine, Yang Li made fun of men and their egos in this way:¹¹⁸

“How can he look so average and still have so much confidence? ... Men are so mysterious, unlike women, who always think of themselves as unimportant, men always think of themselves as the center of the universe. Every single sentence from men carries utmost importance, and points out the right direction in which the world should advance.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Wang Jinxuan, “Nüxing shangzhuo chifan dao shangzhuo chibao de lu haiyou duoyuan? [How Far Is It from Women Having a Seat at the Table to Truly Having Their Fill? 女性上桌吃饭到上桌吃饱的路还有多远?],” *HongKong 01*, May 31, 2025, https://www.hk01.com/深度報道/1075783/脫口秀-二-女性-上桌吃飯-到-上桌吃飽-的路還有多遠?utm_source=01webshare&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=non_native.

¹¹⁷ “Tuokouxu dahui diyiji diyiqi [Rock&Roast Season 3 Episode 1, 脱口秀大会第一季第一期],” Tencent Video, October 25, 2020, video, 20:20-20:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RRM7Gzuoi0>.

¹¹⁸ Yang Li’s performance was in Chinese and this English translation is based on a news article: Jane Li, “Average-yet-confident: A Comedian Coined A Chinese Equivalent to Mansplaining,” *Yahoo Finance*, January 23, 2021, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/average-yet-confident-comedian-coined-100055099.html>.

¹¹⁹ Yang Li, “Yang Li cut: baoxiao tucao zhinan mangmu zixin [Yang Li’s Clip: Straight Men Are Average Yet Confident, 杨笠 CUT: 爆笑吐槽直男盲目自信],” Tencent Video, August 21, 2020, video, 1:03-5:06, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=8JgWQIE4p3g>.

Her performance quickly struck a chord with women viewers, who shared the clip on social media and connected it to their own experiences. As a result, “puxin” (普信, average-yet-confident) rapidly became a buzzword and remains widely used today. The term is applied to mock men who display inflated self-importance while remaining oblivious to the advantages they enjoy because of gender.¹²⁰ At the same time, Yang Li faced harsh criticism from many male viewers. One men’s rights group organized an online campaign urging government censorship, circulating a sample letter that accused her of “propagating hatred” and “insulting all men”.¹²¹ These reactions demonstrate the discomfort of men confronting the loss of dominance in humor traditions where they had long held privilege. Within China’s comedy culture, this represented the first significant reversal of status. As Bergson observes, becoming the subject of laughter produces exclusion and humiliation, a wound especially intolerable for those accustomed to power.¹²²

Even amid the controversy, Yang Li continued to encourage many women comedians to step onto the stand-up stage as a groundbreaking figure. They began addressing diverse subjects, ranging from workplace struggles to broader social issues, moving beyond depictions limited to wives or mothers. Women comedians used humor to examine gender from their own perspectives and incorporated jokes about men into their acts. For instance, Bu Jingyun (步惊云), owner of a stand-up comedy club, described the gender bias she faced

¹²⁰ Jane Li, “Average-yet-confident”.

¹²¹ Zhaoyin Feng and Yitsing Wang, “Yang Li: The 'punchline queen' who offended Chinese men,” *BBC* online, January 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55744860>.

¹²² Bergson, *Laughter*, 6.

as a woman boss.¹²³ Twin performers Yan Yi (颜怡) and Yan Yue (颜悦) discussed women's anxieties over body shape and appearance.¹²⁴ Young comedian Caicai (菜菜) openly confronted menstrual stigma.¹²⁵ Performer Fang Zhuren (房主任), in her fifties, spoke about being forced into an arranged marriage by her parents and later divorcing.¹²⁶ A Uyghur comedian named Xiaopa (小帕) joked about her “forever immature” father, who had been married six times.¹²⁷ In addition, the visibility of women comedians on television has steadily increased each year. By the summer of 2025, two stand-up comedy programs were airing on national television, featuring 42 women comedians, who accounted for about 40 percent of all contestants.¹²⁸

Although women stand-up comedians are still fewer in number than men, their presence has expanded significantly compared with the past. This development is often framed as “women taking a seat at the table”.¹²⁹ In many conservative rural regions of China, including Shandong, Henan, Jiangxi, and Guangdong, women have traditionally been excluded from

¹²³ Bu Jingyun, “Bu jingyun bazong huigui [Bu Jingyun's Overbearing CEO Comeback, 步惊云霸总回归],” Variety Show, June 30, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW4pSozdS2I>.

¹²⁴ Yan Yi and Yan Yue, “Yan Yi Yan Yue tuokouxu [Yan Yi and Yan Yue's Stand-up Comedy, 颜怡颜悦脱口秀],” Variety Show, November 10, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU8wSSnk8nQ>.

¹²⁵ Caicai, “Yuejing xiuchi bei zhe duanzi zhihao le [This Joke Cured My Menstrual Stigma, 月经羞耻被段子治好了],” We TV Comedy Channel, August 27, 2024, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GdusOhH9NM>.

¹²⁶ Fang Zhuren, “Fang Zhuren Moved All to Tears,” iQiyi SuperShow, July 11, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsfJ9zPRItQ&t>.

¹²⁷ Xiaopa, “52 sui haimei shutou de ba [My 52-Year-Old Dad Who Still Hasn't Grown Up, 52 岁还没熟透的爸],” Talkshow Channel, June 29, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJq-oeBM8Yo&t>.

¹²⁸ Stand-up Comedy and Their Friends, “Tuoyou 2 jinri kaibo [Stand-up Comedy and Their Friends Season 2 Starts Airing Today, 脱友 2 今日开播],” Weibo, June 27, 2025, <https://weibo.com/7915369355/5182095883764579>; King of Stand-up Comedy, “Xidan 2 yiren yiju xishi guanxuan [King of Stand-up Comedy Season 2: Cast Members Share Their Happy News, 喜单 2 一人一句喜事官宣],” Weibo, July 3, 2025, <https://weibo.com/7926144523/5184329371092682>.

¹²⁹ Wang Jinxuan, “How Far Is It from Women Having a Seat at the Table to Truly Having Their Fill?”

communal meals—that is, they were not given a seat at the table—which gives the phrase a broader symbolic meaning of gaining entry into spaces and opportunities long dominated by men.¹³⁰ Yang Li expressed this sentiment in a routine when she remarked, “I don’t want to get on stage anymore and just want a seat at the table”,¹³¹ voicing her wish for recognition in the comedy world. Women entering the comedy stage are challenging and reshaping the traditional order of Chinese comedy in the public sphere. Meanwhile, the composition of the audience has also shifted. Instead of being restricted to men in teahouses, it now includes millions of women watching in theaters and on screens. Clips of women comedians circulate widely on social media and video platforms, igniting active online discussions in which women share their experiences and emotions. The spread of routines that satirize men, including the “average-yet-confident” joke, has further empowered women, giving them the means to mock men in daily life and extend ridicule beyond the stand-up stage. Media professional and journalism scholar Lūqiu Luwei has even observed that “it was only after women entered stand-up comedy that gender itself became a topic”.¹³²

Yet, as comedian Qiqi (漆漆) has noted in her routine, while earlier generations in stand-up may have earned “a seat at the table,” her own peers have yet to “have their fill”.¹³³ This

¹³⁰ Hatty Liu, “Are women really banned from the banquet table during Chinese New Year?”, *The World of Chinese*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2019/02/table-manners/>.

¹³¹ Yang Li, “Yang Li jinsheng zongbianju hou piaole zhiyan buxiang shangtai zhixiang shangzhuo [After being promoted to head writer, Yang Li got a little ‘carried away,’ joking that she didn’t want to get on stage anymore and just wanted a seat at the table, 杨笠晋升总编剧后飘了 直言不想上台只想上桌],” iQiyi SuperShow, August 27, 2024, video, 1:15-1:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMZi7LjSdek>.

¹³² Wang Jinxuan, “How Far Is It from Women Having a Seat at the Table to Truly Having Their Fill?”

¹³³ Qiqi, “Nūhai you chifan ziyou yeyou chibao ziyou [Girls Have the Freedom to Sit at the Table and Eat Their Fill, 女孩有吃饭自由, 也有吃饱自由],” Super Comedy League, June 9, 2025, video, 4:26-4:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEbMZU_P6O4.

reflects the reality that Chinese women comedians still face obstacles before achieving genuine equality with men. Their performances remain constrained by censorship and oversight. For example, Xiaopa disclosed that producers often pressured her to remove gender-related jokes on the basis that they might “frighten the audience”.¹³⁴ Likewise, Lüqiu Luwei commented that women who advanced to the finals of comedy competitions often selected safer subjects.¹³⁵ For instance, Xiaolu (小鹿), who placed second in *King of Stand-Up Comedy* in 2024, centered much of her routine on her husband and marriage, delivering her lines in a mildly sweet and gently complaining style.¹³⁶ In addition, although the number of women contestants has grown, their share decreases steeply in the final rounds, and no woman has yet won the championship in a televised stand-up competition. Consequently, the stereotype that “women are less funny than men” continues to hinder and marginalize women comedians. For example, male stand-up comedian Chizi (池子) disparaged women’s stand-up, arguing that their performances conveyed only feminist messages rather than “real comedy”.¹³⁷

Women comedians who perform on public platforms continue to face this bittersweet reality. They navigate an environment that can be both encouraging and discouraging, and yet within it a steady stream of women humor creators has appeared on digital platforms. These

¹³⁴ Xiaopa, “Wo dou nimen xiao de gongde buyayu fangsheng [The Merit of Making You Laugh Is No Less than Releasing Animals, 我逗你们笑的功德不亚于放生],” WeTV Comedy Channel, August 15, 2025, video, 18:20-18:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t99l4OwznIY>.

¹³⁵ Wang Jinxuan, “How Far Is It from Women Having a Seat at the Table to Truly Having Their Fill?”

¹³⁶ Xiaolu, “Hunli shiwo yigeren de xiangmu ma? [Is the Wedding Only My Project? 婚礼是我一个人的项目吗?],” iQiyi SuperShow, August 21, 2024, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57MU_bBcMzs.

¹³⁷ Chizi, “Chizi’s Stand-up Comedy: Say It Anyway,” YGGG-, December 30, 2021, video, 6:40-7:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVBfIwjEw2U>.

online spaces, while distinct from traditional outlets such as television, have developed in parallel with them and now serve as important arenas where women comedians write, produce, circulate, and popularize their own performances.

In the following chapters, I will turn to the central focus of this study, which is character impression comedies created by women. The trajectory of comedy on public stages and in mainstream media has shaped this digital production in important ways. On one hand, the rise of women's visibility and performance in established comedic venues has offered digital creators the confidence to express their perspectives and experiment with telling jokes, marking both a movement toward progress and a shift in humor traditions. On the other hand, humorous short videos created by women also reproduce some of the enduring weaknesses of traditional comedy, including stereotypes and restrictive character types, which continue to shape online humor in limiting ways. A more detailed analysis of these dynamics will be presented in the following chapters.

Chapter 1. Mocking the Patriarchy:

Women's Character Impression Comedy of "Greasy Men" on Douyin

The analytical section of this thesis is structured according to the gender of the impersonated figures, focusing on two main categories: women humor creators on Douyin who imitate men, and those who imitate women. This chapter begins with the first category, examining humorous videos in which women perform male personas.

Although a considerable number of women creators on Douyin engage in portraying men and generate a substantial number of related videos, the variety of roles within this practice remains fairly narrow. Generally, the most dominant and almost exclusive character type revolves around the persona of the "*greasy man*" (*youni nan*, 油腻男), which has become the most recognizable and emblematic figure within this genre. This trend does not necessarily imply a lack of originality or imagination among women creators, nor does it suggest their inability to identify other types of male characters. Rather, the term "greasy man" is inherently broad and adaptable, encompassing a wide spectrum of laughable, unpleasant, and satirical traits under a single label. Consequently, before analyzing these imitation videos, it is essential to first clarify the definition and historical evolution of the buzzword "greasy man".

By 2017, the expression "greasy man" had already gained traction across the Chinese internet. The adjective "greasy," serving as the opposite of "refreshing," originally referred to something coated in oil, a description that might easily evoke associations with excess body fat or unhealthy eating habits. However, within Chinese discourse, when "greasy" is applied

to describe a person, it does not primarily denote physical appearance but rather refers to an off-putting personality and behavior.¹³⁸ As media commentator Liu Hongbo (刘洪波) observes, the term “greasy” functions as a “semantic cluster” encompassing numerous undesirable characteristics. It resists precise definition while remaining vivid in expression, and within a given context, its meaning becomes instantly recognizable, its core connotations unmistakable.¹³⁹ From the very outset of its emergence, the term greasy man was closely associated with middle-aged men. In October 2017, writer Feng Tang (冯唐) published a Weibo[3]¹⁴⁰ post titled *How to Avoid Becoming a Greasy Middle-Aged Creepy Man* (如何避免成为一个油腻的中年猥琐男). The post clearly resonated with audiences, attracting more than ten thousand shares and over two thousand comments.¹⁴¹ Feng listed ten pieces of advice, which included avoiding weight gain, maintaining cleanliness, continuing to learn, staying active, refraining from discussing sex publicly, resisting excessive nostalgia, and abstaining from lecturing younger individuals.¹⁴² Yet, the article’s moralizing tone conflicted with its own message, provoking widespread criticism. Many readers argued that Feng Tang himself embodied the very traits of the greasy man he claimed to warn against, questioning how he possessed the authority to offer such advice.¹⁴³ Both the text and the public reaction to it revealed the emerging shape of the “greasy man” stereotype: a slovenly, self-satisfied, coarse,

¹³⁸ Issac Peng and Thomas Ebenfeld, “What Are Greasy Men in China?” *marktforschung.de*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.marktforschung.de/marktforschung/a/what-are-greasy-men-in-china/>.

¹³⁹ Liu Hongbo, “Zhongnian youni shizai shuoshenme [What Does “Middle-Aged Greasiness” Mean?, “中年油腻” 是在说什么],” *People.cn*, November 13, 2017, https://paper.people.com.cn/mszk/html/2017-11/13/content_1817505.htm.

¹⁴⁰ Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform similar to X (Twitter).

¹⁴¹ Feng Tang (@冯唐), “Ruhe bimian chengwei yige younide zhongnian weisuonan [How to Avoid Becoming a Greasy Middle-Aged Creepy Man, 如何避免成为一个油腻的中年猥琐男],” Weibo, 27 October, 2017, https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404167335584902428#_0.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Yibezibudiuxia (@一辈子不丢下), “你明明就最油腻和猥琐, 到底哪里来的自信写出这种文章[You are the greasiest one yourself, how could you have the confidence to write this],” Weibo, October 27, 2017, https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404167335584902428#_0.

and didactic man, typically in his forties or fifties. Moreover, during this early stage, the social criteria for identifying greasiness had not yet extended beyond physicality. Thus, an overweight, poorly groomed appearance continued to fit the prevailing stereotype of the greasy man, reinforcing its visual and behavioral associations within popular culture.

Over the following eight years, the meaning of greasy man continued to evolve and broaden in scope. In November 2017, media commentator Deng Haijian (邓海建) criticized the label greasy man for stigmatizing middle-aged men, suggesting that it reflected an unhealthy obsession with youth and an implicit belief that young, attractive men were exempt from such a charge.¹⁴⁴ Over time, however, the reach of the term gradually extended beyond issues of age and appearance, coming to encompass wider groups once considered immune to this type of social derision. One illustrative case is that of Huang Xiaoming (黄晓明), a renowned actor in mainland China celebrated for his appearance, who served as the manager in the third season of the reality show *Chinese Restaurant* (中餐厅) in 2019. His forceful management approach and authoritative remarks generated fierce criticism from the public. His assertion, “I do not care what you think, I only care what I think”, became so widely quoted that it was later included among China’s top ten popular expressions of 2019.¹⁴⁵ The combination of his behavior on the show and similarly self-centered or moralizing traits displayed in later interviews placed him under public scrutiny and ultimately linked him to the stereotype of the greasy man. This episode indicates that greasiness no longer excludes

¹⁴⁴ Deng Haijian, “Zai buduan chouhua zhongnian nanren zhong wo kandaole lingyizhong youni [In the Ongoing Vilification of Middle-Aged Men, I See Another Form of Greasiness, 在不断丑化中年男人中我看到了另一种油腻],” *People.cn*, November 1, 2017, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/n1/2017/1101/c1003-29619679.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Luo Pan, “2019 nian shida liuxingyu gongbu [The Top Ten Popular Expressions of 2019 Released, 2019 年十大流行语公布],” *ChinaNews*, December 2, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200205115327/http://finance.chinanews.com/yl/2019/12-02/9022649.shtml>.

attractive men from ridicule. As Li Qinyu (李勤余), a columnist for *The Paper*, observed, “whether someone is greasy has nothing to do with appearance; rather, figures like Huang Xiaoming are mocked because they lack self-awareness and respect for others”.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, some men who habitually lecture others or exaggerate their knowledge—regardless of their age or looks—have also been labeled as greasy. Within Chinese online culture, this phenomenon is often described as *die wei* (爹味), literally meaning “dad flavor.” The expression does not denote fatherhood itself but a patronizing masculine disposition, particularly one expressed through an overly didactic tone. A similar term in English is *mansplaining*, which refers to men explaining something needlessly or condescendingly, often to women, in a way that suggests arrogance or sexism. A prominent example is the actor Jin Dong (靳东), who frequently portrays successful or elite characters and tends to project an intellectual persona through social media posts and interviews. He often quotes classical texts and presents himself as cultured. However, audiences soon identified contradictions that damaged this image: he once claimed to be reading a book by a “Nobel Prize winner in mathematics” (an award that does not exist), wrongly credited a popular Chinese internet verse to Vincent van Gogh, and, during a public exchange with singer Li Jian (李健), failed to recall a book he had read recently.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, Jin Dong has come to symbolize a certain type of excessively self-important male celebrity whose ostentatious displays of intellect have exacerbated audience fatigue.

¹⁴⁶ Li Qinyu, “Zenyang gei zhongnian nanxing ququyou? [How Can Middle-Aged Male Stars Get Rid of Greasiness? 怎样给中年男星去去油?]” *The Paper*, August 17, 2019, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_4188855.

¹⁴⁷ Yanzhiyouliou (@言之尤里 ou), “Jindong: zichuang nuobeier shuxuejiang de wenhuaren, tazai zhuangx fangmian queshi youyitao [Jin Dong: A Self-Styled Intellectual Who Invented the Nobel Prize in Mathematics, and Truly Excels at Pretension, 靳东：自创诺贝尔数学奖的文化人，他在装 X 方面确实有一套],” Bilibili, June 2, 2021, video, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1q64y1R7Z9/?vd_source=e3858125a412bbe649a8260714c7fdb9.

In addition, attractive and physically fit men are frequently criticized as greasy when they are perceived as engaging in *shua shuai* (耍帅). This Chinese expression, which literally means “to show off one’s handsomeness” or “to act cool,” refers to behaviors such as striking exaggerated poses, flaunting one’s appeal to excess, or employing overly sentimental or flirtatious language, all intended to draw admiration from others. The phrase typically carries a playful yet derisive undertone, suggesting that the person is striving too hard or projecting confidence in an exaggeratedly performative way. Those who indulge in *shua shuai* may indeed possess a certain charm, yet their excessive self-absorption and conspicuous attempts to parade their attractiveness often make them unpleasantly greasy. A widely circulated online saying in China captures this idea succinctly: “A male celebrity needs only one step to become greasy, and that step occurs the moment he realizes he is truly handsome”.¹⁴⁸ For example, actor Yang Shuo (杨烁)—who deliberately highlights the contours of his profile and the dimples on his cheeks in television dramas, and who has gratuitously removed his shirt on variety shows to show off his muscular build—became a defining example of the greasy man.¹⁴⁹ He was even given the nickname “oil field” (油田), a term implying that his degree of greasiness far surpassed that of his peers.¹⁵⁰

By 2020, the notion of the greasy man had become closely associated with another popular phrase, average-yet-confident man, which, as discussed in the background chapter, gained prominence through the stand-up performances of Yang Li. The two expressions are

¹⁴⁸ JiuxingTravel (@九行 Travel), “Lunyouni zhaxie nanmingxing shiniannei zhaobudao duishou [On Greasiness, These Male Celebrities Have Remained Unmatched for Ten Years, 论油腻, 这些男明星十年内找不到对手],” *NewsQQ*, May 7, 2021, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20210507A0A1WK00>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Yureduyu (@娱热读娱), “Cong xiaobaozong dao dayoutian, yangshuo zhejinian zenmele [From “Little Boss Bao” to “Big Oil Field”: What Has Happened to Yang Shuo in Recent Years? 从小包总到大油田, 杨烁这几年怎么了?],” *163.com*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/G81A10JO5444U7J.html>.

often used in comparable contexts and frequently appear side by side. For instance, a video criticizing actor Zhang Han (张翰), another male celebrity known for flaunting his appeal, was titled “Greasy Brains, Average-yet-Confident Thoughts,” and it attracted more than 1.1 million views.¹⁵¹ Similarly, episode 78 of the podcast *Lemon Talk*, which has nearly 20,000 subscribers, focused on the theme “Greasy, Mansplaining, or Average-yet-Confident? Which One Is the MOST Annoying? ALL OF THEM!”¹⁵² These two expressions now operate almost interchangeably, revealing that one of the most distinctive traits of the greasy man, as understood by Chinese internet users, is an inflated self-assurance disconnected from one’s real abilities or situation. This brand of narcissism and overconfidence often drives such individuals to flaunt their presumed strengths publicly and to speak without restraint, displaying limited sensitivity toward the perspectives or emotions of others.

Furthermore, the definition of greasy man has progressively broadened to encompass deeper social and ethical dimensions, moving beyond a lighthearted discussion of minor personality flaws toward issues related to morality and even legality. Specifically, behaviors such as gender discrimination, psychological manipulation or control of a partner, and acts of sexual harassment have also come to be included within the greasy category. In 2022, the widely criticized television series *Gentlemen of East 8th* (东八区的先生们) featured male characters who demeaned the woman protagonist’s professional abilities, pulled at her bra

¹⁵¹ Jieerlianshan wangxiangzheng (@接二连珊妄想症), “Youni gongzhan danao, puxin daiti sikao [Greasy Brains, Average-yet-Confident Thoughts, 油腻攻占大脑, 普信代替思考],” Bilibili, October 5, 2024, video, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1s31XYLERW/?vd_source=e3858125a412bbe649a8260714c7fdb9.

¹⁵² Lemon Talk, “Youni, diwei, puxin, ni zui buneng jieshou nage? All! [Greasy, Mansplaining, or Average-yet-Confident? Which One Is the MOST Annoying? ALL OF THEM! 油腻, 爹味, 普信, 你最不能接受哪个? ALL!]” Xiaoyuzhou, August 23, 2021, podcast, <https://www.xiaoyuzhoufm.com/episode/612386e1cc5f215c6e0b7dee>.

strap despite not knowing her, and commented judgmentally on women's bodies.¹⁵³ Audiences immediately branded such behaviors as greasy: on Douban, the Chinese equivalent of Rotten Tomatoes, the series received an abysmal rating of just 2.1 out of 10.

As asserted by *People's Daily*, "Being greasy is a kind of excess; excessive flavor, excessive self-esteem, and excessive desire".¹⁵⁴ Virtually any behavior that transgresses appropriate boundaries can now be characterized as greasy. More broadly, greasy has evolved into an ever-expanding and semantically layered adjective, and the greasy man archetype now represents nearly all undesirable male figures, especially those viewed unfavorably by women. The term greasy man is now widely recognized and actively employed throughout mainland China, where satire, ridicule, and criticism of such men resonate strongly among the public. It is therefore unsurprising that, during the first half of 2023, a popular Douyin trend emerged in which primarily young women creators participated in a viral challenge mocking the greasy man persona by imitating everyday male behaviors.

As discussed earlier, interpretations of greasy man differ from one individual to another. Within the Douyin trend of imitating greasy men, women creators selected a wide range of representative characters as the central figures of their sketches. Examples include a middle-aged man who dominates social gatherings with long-winded commentary, an American-born Chinese man who flaunts his foreign background, and men who stare at women in elevators. Social media creator Fang Touming, widely credited as the originator of this trend, chose an overconfident male high school student as a typical example of the greasy man archetype.

¹⁵³ Shenran (@深燃), "Dongbaqu de xianshengmen daodi laizaina? [What Exactly Went Wrong with Gentlemen of East 8th? 《东八区的先生们》到底烂在哪?]" *Jiemian*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/8087147.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Sun Jiahui, "What makes a greasy man?" *The World of Chinese*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2017/11/greasy-is-the-word/>.

These videos have been met with enthusiastic reception, many of them accumulating over 200,000 likes. The most popular video by Fang Touming portrays a high school boy repeatedly admiring himself in the classroom mirror and performing what he imagines are attractive gestures while drinking water (as figure 2). Until October 2025, the video has amassed an impressive 1.366 million likes.¹⁵⁵ Some women creators were already established internet influencers who gained additional popularity through such videos, including Zhou Yingjun (周英俊), Miaoyixia (喵一夏), and Huaxiao (华小 O). Others were ordinary Douyin users who had previously attracted little attention but gained visibility by joining this trend, potentially launching new careers as video bloggers, such as Miaocuijiao (喵脆角).

This trend emerged in late February 2023 and gradually lost momentum toward the end of the year, yet it never disappeared entirely. Videos in which women creators imitate the



Figure 2. Multiple screenshots of Fang Touming impersonating a greasy high school boy. Screenshot by the author. Source: Fang Touming, “Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia,” Douyin, March 14, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/oI-D1-mFCLA/>.

¹⁵⁵ Fang Touming, “Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia [Look at this, I’m gonna throw up, 你们看, 我去吐一下],” Douyin, March 14, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/oI-D1-mFCLA/>.

greasy man shifted from a fleeting viral sensation to a stable thematic genre. Although their growth slowed and no longer reflected the explosive rise of the initial wave, creators continued to produce this type of content into the present. Fang Touming's uploads have become less frequent but have never stopped, and as of October 2025, she continued to release greasy man imitation videos. One such video, portraying a man smoking inside a car, gained more than 210,000 likes within a single day.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Zhou Yingjun posted her first greasy man imitation video on May 2, 2023. While her recent works now display greater diversity in both style and subject matter, this theme remains one of her recurring creative focuses. To date, she has produced a total of eighty-one such videos.¹⁵⁷ Some creators even began exploring this form of performance after its initial wave of popularity had subsided. For instance, Bacardiiiiiii, who has more than 880,000 followers, did not post her first greasy man imitation video until May 2024. Since then, she has created twenty-six in total. These videos continued to receive strong audience engagement, with her most popular one accumulating 340,000 likes.¹⁵⁸

Overall, the sustained presence of this content beyond its original viral phase demonstrates that the greasy man imitation has matured from a short-lived internet craze into a continuing form of creative expression that retains wide public appeal. The endurance, versatility, and inclusiveness of this category make it a meaningful focal point for the study of women's impression comedy on Douyin.

¹⁵⁶ Fang Touming, "Shui ganzuo? [Who dar es to sit? 谁敢坐?]" Douyin, October 3, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/6M4PZTkCzD4/>.

¹⁵⁷ Zhou Yingjun (周英俊, @gaga_zyj), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/iuZXxwYmbGs/>.

¹⁵⁸ Bacardiiiiiii (@225163208ba), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/WlgrCgLOcqk/>.

Data

Since February 2023, I have been systematically observing the growing trend of women creators on Douyin imitating the greasy man persona. In total, I have watched more than three hundred such videos. For the purposes of this study, I selected five representative influencers, namely Fang Touming, Miaocuijiao, Zhou Yingjun, Huaxiaoo, and Huaxianbei (花仙贝), and compiled all of their greasy man impression videos uploaded before December 31, 2023. This timeframe corresponds to the trend's initial surge and peak, during which a large volume of imitation videos brought significant public attention to the phenomenon. Their productions exemplify the defining features of the greasy man trend, as each creator consistently received over 20,000 likes for most videos and produced at least nineteen short clips centered on this theme, illustrating both the genre's popularity and their sustained creative engagement.

I conducted a quantitative analysis of these samples (see table 1). First, I counted the number of characters in each video to better understand the creators' performance strategies and the level of interactivity within their content. From this analysis, five primary categories of male behavior emerged, which form the basis for the data classification. The first category involves men lecherously staring at women, especially unfamiliar women in public settings. The second category focuses on harassment, encompassing multiple forms of sexual harassment, both verbal and physical, as well as persistent contact from ex-boyfriends. The third category can be described as mansplaining, as previously discussed, in which men attempt to explain or lecture on a subject in a patronizing or overly confident manner, suggesting that women lack adequate understanding or expertise. Discriminatory or

misogynistic remarks are also included within this group.

The fourth category consists of the aforementioned shua shuai behaviors, referring to exaggerated posturing, excessive displays of self-charm, and the use of overtly sentimental or flirtatious language. The final classification includes acts of rudeness or violation, such as plagiarism or smoking in public. Emotional abuse toward women partners is also grouped within this category.

It is worth noting that the data used for this research were collected by me in December 2023 for analytical purposes, and certain conditions have since changed. Due to official censorship, user reports, or voluntary deletions by creators, approximately fifty videos that

Blogger			Fang Touming	Miaocuijiao	Zhou Yingjun	Huaxiao	Huaxianbei
Total number			27	30	77	19	19
Number of characters	1 person		22	21	71	17	18
	2 people	1 man & 1 woman	1	9	2	2	0
		2 men	4	0	4	0	1
Behaviors	Lecherous gaze		4	2	9	2	8
	Harassment		2	1	9	1	4
	Mansplaining		1	22	55	1	9
	Shua shuai (耍帅)		21	3	35	19	17
	Other behaviors (violation/impoliteness)		9	3	20	4	10

Table 1. Creative data of five women influencers who imitate “greasy men.”

were accessible during data collection are no longer available. For example, the influencer Miaocuijiao has deleted nearly all of her comedy content and redirected her focus toward fashion videos, though the reason for this transition remains unclear. Nevertheless, because she was among the earliest participants in the greasy man imitation trend and produced as many as thirty highly popular videos within this genre, I have retained data from her earlier works as one of the primary references for this thesis. As an observer of this phenomenon, I regard the preservation and examination of content that has since disappeared as valuable for understanding the rapid transformations of this online environment. In the sections that follow, I will develop my analysis based on these collected data.

1.1. Representing the Whole Life of Greasy Men

When observing the short-video trend of imitating greasy men, one's strongest impression is the vibrant creativity of women creators and the range of their portrayals. Each creator presents a distinct interpretation of the greasy man archetype. In the selected samples, the characters' personalities in these influencers' short videos differ markedly. Fang Touming primarily imitates self-absorbed high school boys.¹⁵⁹ Zhou Yingjun and Miaocuijiao, by contrast, frequently mimic middle-aged men encountered during blind dates. The former depicts her character as a wealthy businessman who flaunts his charm,¹⁶⁰ while the latter focuses on men who enjoy lecturing women in a self-important tone. Huaxiao consistently portrays a man in a steady romantic relationship who continually seeks to control his

¹⁵⁹ Fang Touming, Douyin Homepage.

¹⁶⁰ Zhou Yingjun, Douyin Homepage.

girlfriend.¹⁶¹ Huaxianbei, meanwhile, does not confine herself to a single persona but creates a range of greasy man types across multiple videos, from male passengers harassing women on public transportation to self-satisfied gym enthusiasts.¹⁶² Nonetheless, she also maintains a leading and recognizable figure (a rude live streamer) around whom she has produced at least seven videos.¹⁶³

These influencers structure their works around relatively stable characters and reinforce recognition through consistent attire across videos, which helps to solidify these portrayals in the audience's memory. For instance, Fang Touming always appears in a black down jacket paired with checkered sweatpants. On April 23, 2023, she uploaded a video in which she did not appear in person; instead, the video displayed only this outfit, yet it still received about 175,000 likes and 26,000 comments.¹⁶⁴ A user (ID: @R9876emember) commented, "Just looking at the clothes makes me uncomfortable",¹⁶⁵ illustrating how vividly this costume evokes the character. Likewise, Miaocuijiao's impersonation consistently features a brown jacket and black-rimmed glasses, giving her male persona a slightly disheveled and unrefined appearance. Zhou Yingjun's version wears a white shirt with gold-framed glasses, reinforcing the image of an urban professional. Huaxiao's character typically appears in a short-sleeved white sweater with brown trousers, while Huaxianbei's live-streamer persona wears a black T-shirt with a lock of hair falling across her forehead. Together, these creators showcase a

¹⁶¹ Huaxiao (华小 O, @LH5210), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, https://v.douyin.com/XADPH_uqKSI/.

¹⁶² Huaxianbei (花仙贝, @1581793125), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/s8xWOnOISvs/>.

¹⁶³ Huaxianbei, "Heji: youge dawutai [Playlist: The Greasy Bro's Stage, 合集: 油哥大舞台]," Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/s8xWOnOISvs/>.

¹⁶⁴ Fang Touming, "Cuigeng? Wo sanyuesan fangjia xiuxi [Urging for an update? I'll be taking a break on the Double Third Festival, 催更??我三月三放假休息]," Douyin, April 23, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, https://v.douyin.com/kDj_1o2fBiU/.

¹⁶⁵ @R9876emember, April 23, 2023, comment on Fang Touming, "Cuigeng? Wo sanyuesan fangjia xiuxi."

variety of greasy man types, each defined by distinctive mannerisms, appearances, and stylistic choices.

Drawing upon their own experiences and observations, women creators explore the nuances of representing unsettling male behaviors and speech patterns. As shown in the data discussed earlier, the behaviors exhibited by the greasy men in these samples can be grouped into five principal categories. Within each category, creators highlight specific details to express similar traits through individual stylistic approaches. For example, when portraying the lecherous gaze of men, Fang Touming sets her scene in a hotel corridor,¹⁶⁶ Huaxianbei situates it on a public street (as figure 3),¹⁶⁷ and Zhou Yingjun, Miaocuijiao, and Huaxiaoo depict moments where men leer at women during dates. For shua shuai performances, the male high school student that Fang Touming imitates drinks water in an overly theatrical fashion,¹⁶⁸ while Zhou Yingjun's middle-aged character insists on playing the piano for a woman despite lacking real proficiency.¹⁶⁹

After selecting a specific type of greasy man, women creators design appearances that are both humorous and consistent with the chosen persona. They also construct a range of narrative situations around their representative characters to ensure their content remains engaging and leaves a memorable impression on viewers. Consequently, these imitation videos display striking diversity, to the point that many audiences now describe the

¹⁶⁶ Fang Touming, "Buxiaoxin zhuangdao nilo xiaomeinyu [Oops, I bumped into you, pretty girl. 不小心撞到你咯小美女]," Douyin, April 21, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/E0ShndYb65g/>.

¹⁶⁷ Huaxianbei, "Dangni duzi zoulu yudao women [When you walk alone and run into us, 当你独自走路遇到我们]," Douyin, May 13, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/7AN0GY5ULxQ/>.

¹⁶⁸ Fang Touming, "Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia."

¹⁶⁹ Zhou Yingjun, "Shude laidian bixuting [When uncle calls, you'd better pick up, 叔的来电 必须听]," Douyin, December 5, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/NR2fkOXBhUU/>.

phenomenon as “the whole life of greasy men”.¹⁷⁰

Although originality and variation are essential for influencers to sustain audience attention over time, the videos also reveal the extensive supply of real-life material available to the creators. These comic performances offer witty portrayals of the irritating behaviors associated with greasy men in everyday contexts. Yet this abundance of inspiration (while endless and imaginative) also reflects something unsettling. The ability of these creators to avoid repetition suggests that the behaviors they imitate are both pervasive and persistently troubling. As shown in the collected data, 86.6% of the videos feature a greasy man’s solo performance. However, this does not imply that the scenes portray men in isolation. In many



Figure 3. Fang Touming and Huaxianbei imitating men’s lecherous gaze in their Douyin videos. Screenshots by the author. Source: Fang Touming, “Buxiaoxin zhuangdao nilo xiaomeinyu,” Douyin, April 21, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/E0ShndYb65g/>. Huaxianbei, “Dangni duzi zoulu yudao women,” Douyin, May 13, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/7AN0GY5ULxQ/>.

¹⁷⁰ Huangguaqishui (黄瓜汽水), “Zaidouyin, nuxing jiti chuangzuole youninan de yisheng [On Douyin, Women Creators Collectively Crafted ‘The Whole Life of Greasy Men’, 在抖音, 女性集体创作了‘油腻男的一生’],” *Huxiu News*, May 22, 2023, <https://m.huxiu.com/article/1591036.html>.

cases, the women impersonating men interact directly with the camera or construct the illusion of conversing with an unseen character. Thus, the viewer often occupies the position of the silent participant within the scene, typically imagined as a woman subjected to intrusive gazes, suggestive comments, or awkward self-displays.

Both this mode of filming and the gender of the creators constantly remind audiences that each video presupposes a woman's presence behind the camera. The reason women creators can so vividly depict "the whole life of greasy men" is that they have also experienced "the whole life of encountering greasy men." From the classroom to the office, from the street to restaurants, and from personal relationships to casual interactions with strangers, women routinely confront uncomfortable stares, deal with men lacking boundaries, or encounter forms of sexual harassment at different stages of their lives.

As humor theorists such as Kuipers and Christie Davies observe, the spread of jokes and memes relies on their ability to resonate with shared emotions, local values, and cultural understandings.¹⁷¹ Humor always emerges within specific cultural, social, and historical contexts.¹⁷² On social media, the circulation of humor has accelerated, and emotional resonance can quickly develop into a viral wave of comedic expression that captures public participation. Within this fast-moving environment, the greasy man imitation trend on Douyin has attracted a seemingly limitless number of new creators producing a variety of content, alongside engaged audiences eager to like, comment, and share. This phenomenon not only illustrates the effectiveness of this particular form of humor but also indicates that the

¹⁷¹ Giseline Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 1.

¹⁷² Han and Kuipers, "Humour and TikTok Memes During the 2020 Pandemic Lockdown," 398.

behaviors being mocked are widely recognizable and relatable to many women, thereby generating collective empathy. Taken together, these individual works constitute a form of shared cultural creation, and these personal experiences converge into a collective expression of gender tension and structural gender inequality.

More specifically, videos that imitate men's lecherous gazes and harassing behaviors primarily illustrate the sexualization and objectification of women, positioning them as easily exploitable sexual resources unworthy of respect. Other behaviors, categorized as violations or acts of impoliteness, are more directly associated with moral and even legal concerns, thereby deepening existing gender tensions. Such actions evoke fear, discomfort, and repulsion among women, posing genuine risks to both their physical safety and psychological well-being. In contrast, seemingly innocuous greasy behaviors, such as shua shuai or mansplaining, tend to attract less immediate criticism, despite the gendered dynamics they expose.

According to the dataset, shua shuai behaviors account for 54.9% of all examples, while mansplaining appears in 51.2% of the videos. These figures indicate that both women creators and their audiences are particularly familiar with this kind of greasy man, likely because they have frequently encountered such behavior in everyday life. At their core, both categories center on men's exaggerated self-confidence and deliberate performance of personal charm, especially their masculinity—shua shuai expressed through physical action and mansplaining through verbal assertion. Self-absorbed men, or what Yang Li has famously described as “average-yet-confident men,” constantly seek to display their perceived superiority or attractiveness, to the point that many women find such behaviors tiresome or

even unsettling. Importantly, men's overconfidence is not simply a social stereotype but a phenomenon consistently validated by empirical research. For example, studies conducted by Mary Lundeberg, Paul Fox, and Judith Punóchař reveal that men often report higher confidence levels than women when taking exams, even when their answers are incorrect, whereas women's self-assessments tend to be more accurate.¹⁷³ Similarly, Brad Barber and Terrance Odean's research on financial decision-making demonstrates that men display higher confidence in investment contexts, sometimes resulting in misguided outcomes caused by overestimation of their own abilities.¹⁷⁴ This raises an important question: what sustains men's confidence, and why do they so often feel compelled to exhibit their charm, particularly in front of women?

One explanation can be found in the unequal standards by which men and women are socially evaluated within patriarchal structures. As social psychologist Linda Jackson's research shows, women's appearances are more heavily emphasized and scrutinized than their abilities, whereas men's looks are not subject to the same level of judgment or expectation.¹⁷⁵ As a result, men may feel more assured about their physical appeal and less pressured by appearance-based evaluation. Moreover, patriarchal societies place greater emphasis on male achievement, offering men more access to resources and smoother pathways toward advancement. This social environment does not inhibit men's development but instead reinforces their self-belief. From a young age, boys are often perceived as

¹⁷³ Mary A. Lundeberg, Paul W. Fox, and Judith Punóchař, "Highly Confident but Wrong: Gender Differences and Similarities in Confidence Judgments," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 86, no. 1 (1994): 115.

¹⁷⁴ Brad M. Barber and Terrance Odean, "Boys Will Be Boys: Gender, Overconfidence, and Common Stock Investment," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116, no. 1 (2001): 263.

¹⁷⁵ Linda A. Jackson, *Physical Appearance and Gender: Sociobiological and Sociocultural Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 8.

intelligent, capable, and inherently suited for intellectual or professional success.¹⁷⁶ In contrast, from school to the workplace, women are more prone to face structural biases that limit their opportunities and diminish recognition of their competence.¹⁷⁷ In essence, men's confidence—and sometimes their narcissism—originates from a cycle of encouragement, leniency, and social expectation, while women endure heightened scrutiny and negative evaluations. Even worse, when women express confidence or assertiveness, they are frequently labeled as aggressive or unfeminine.¹⁷⁸

Therefore, in the imitation of greasy men's mansplaining, remarks that criticize or constrain women frequently appear, revealing the connection between such discourse and men's inflated egos. Both Miaocuijiao and Zhou Yingjun often produce videos that capture this mentality. Zhou Yingjun's character habitually tells crude jokes, comments on women's bodies,¹⁷⁹ or asserts that women are ignorant of business matters.¹⁸⁰ In Miaocuijiao's sketches, the male persona implies that his girlfriend dresses inappropriately, accuses her of wasting excessive time and money on pets, and repeatedly insists that women should prioritize marriage over professional ambitions. These statements not only expose the widespread gender bias, objectification, and misogynistic attitudes among men but also reflect the complex social expectations that women must navigate. Women's consumption habits, clothing, and lifestyle choices remain constant subjects of scrutiny and unsolicited advice.

¹⁷⁶ Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Andrei Cimpian, "Evidence of Bias Against Girls and Women in Contexts That Emphasize Intellectual Ability," *American Psychologist* 73, no. 9 (2018): 1149.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Gabriela Molina Consolo and Yasmin Poole, "The confidence gap: why men are more likely to contribute in the classroom," *The Oxford Student*, March 30, 2024, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2024/03/30/the-confidence-gap-men-in-classroom/>.

¹⁷⁹ Zhou Yingjun, "Xinghui, biren zhenyouni [Hello, my name is Zhen Youni, 幸会, 鄙人甄游溺]", Douyin, May 6, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/XDRWkYzh0WY/>.

¹⁸⁰ Zhou Yingjun, "Shu daodi zuoshade [So what exactly does uncle do? 叔到底做啥的?]" Douyin, June 30, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/-72AJgH27T8/>.

Similarly, psychologists Agnieszka Golec de Zavala and Kinga Bierwiaczonek agree that there is a strong correlation between men's collective narcissism and gender discrimination.¹⁸¹ Within a patriarchal framework characterized by systemic inequality, masculinity is often overvalued and idealized. Collective narcissism among men, defined as the belief that men as a social group are superior yet insufficiently appreciated by women, strongly correlates with individual narcissism. As a result, individual men may derive confidence and a sense of dominance from identifying with the male collective.¹⁸²

Paradoxically, however, the glorification of masculinity also produces underlying insecurity and fear of inadequacy—an anxiety about not being “man enough.” Psychologists Jennifer Bosson and Joseph Vandello describe this psychological dynamic as “*precarious manhood*,” referring to the belief that manhood is a fragile social status that must be continuously validated through visible acts of masculinity.¹⁸³ To manage these anxieties, men often reaffirm their sense of masculinity by supporting gender-biased ideologies and reinforcing traditional gender roles that justify male privilege.¹⁸⁴ Men who perceive their gender status as unstable tend to reassert it through overtly masculine behaviors, such as through displaying physical strength, boasting about success, and reaffirming dominance over women.¹⁸⁵ Behaviors such as shua shuai and mansplaining exemplify this pattern. For

¹⁸¹ Agnieszka Golec de Zavala and Kinga Bierwiaczonek, “Male, National, and Religious Collective Narcissism Predict Sexism,” *Sex Roles* 84, no. 11–12 (2021): 680.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 684.

¹⁸³ Jennifer K. Bosson and Joseph A. Vandello, “Precarious Manhood and Its Links to Action and Aggression,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (2011): 82.

¹⁸⁴ Kathryn M. Kroeper, Diana T. Sanchez, and Mary S. Himmelstein, “Heterosexual Men's Confrontation of Sexual Prejudice: The Role of Precarious Manhood,” *Sex Roles* 70 (2014): 2.

¹⁸⁵ Emma C. O'Connor, Thomas E. Ford, and Noely C. Banos, “Restoring Threatened Masculinity: The Appeal of Sexist and Anti-Gay Humor,” *Sex Roles* 77 (2017): 567.

instance, Huaxianbei parodies a gym enthusiast who continually flaunts his muscles,¹⁸⁶ while Fang Touming portrays a high school boy who deliberately shows off his basketball skills.¹⁸⁷ Zhou Yingjun's impersonations frequently depict men bragging in public about their experiences abroad or their business ventures, often in ways that appear both exaggerated and socially tone-deaf.¹⁸⁸

Furthermore, precarious manhood often causes men to feel threatened by competent or accomplished women, which partly explains their impulse to demonstrate their abilities while simultaneously diminishing those of women.¹⁸⁹ In Zhou Yingjun's video, the greasy man converses with a woman on a date and remarks that her height of 168 centimeters is "a bit too tall," expressing unease that her stature might undermine his own masculinity. When the woman reveals her accomplishments, such as having studied abroad and speaking fluent English, the greasy man grows visibly uncomfortable and responds by awkwardly using his limited English in an effort to prove he is not inferior.¹⁹⁰ Under the persistent pressure to be "real men" some men attempt to reassert control or superiority by questioning women's competence, thereby reaffirming their own sense of masculinity.¹⁹¹ The confidence men display, therefore, does not always reflect genuine self-assurance. On the contrary, it often functions as a performative strategy to claim and preserve manhood by appearing more

¹⁸⁶ Huaxianbei, "Nimen xiankan, wo zichui sanshi fenzhong huilai [You guys go ahead and watch, I'll go punish myself for thirty minutes, 你们先看 我自捶三十分钟回来]", Douyin, March 27, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/Pq9HYcVJhFE/>.

¹⁸⁷ Fang Touming, "Paidui dafan de shihou qianmian shi fang touming [Fang Touming was standing in front of me in the cafeteria line, 排队打饭的时候前面是方头明]", Douyin, April 2, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/ts-yJdXCIVc/>.

¹⁸⁸ Zhou Yingjun, "Li shude biao zhun haishi chaledian [Still not quite up to uncle's standards, 离叔的标准还是差了点]", Douyin, July 22, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/-5m759deJyc/>.

¹⁸⁹ Bosson and Vandello, "Precarious Manhood," 82.

¹⁹⁰ Zhou Yingjun, "Li shude biao zhun haishi chaledian".

¹⁹¹ O'Connor, Ford, and Banos, "Restoring Threatened Masculinity," 568.

dominant or capable than women.

In addition, the imitation of greasy men reveals how the pursuit of masculinity through the belittlement of women frequently occurs in romantic and interpersonal contexts, including dating and long-term relationships. Although these men appear to participate in relationships, their primary aim is to exhibit their success and wealth rather than engage emotionally or show respect toward women. Their concept of “love” becomes transactional, measured by material provision rather than emotional reciprocity. They idolize money and social standing (both being perceived as an essential route to, or manifestation of, manhood) while rejecting empathy, care, and vulnerability, qualities they associate with femininity and weakness. This mentality renders them emotionally irresponsible and prevents the formation of equal, nurturing partnerships. For instance, in Huaxiaoo’s portrayal of a business elite, the male character appears generous when he offers financial assistance to his girlfriend, yet he explicitly refuses to offer emotional support when she asks for companionship, dismissively saying, “I’ll give you an extra 1,500 yuan instead”.¹⁹² Within such relationships, women often function as instruments through which men display masculinity, or worse, as sexual objects regarded as entitlements of a so-called “real man”. This logic assumes that a man who achieves masculine status is naturally entitled to sexual access, absolving him from emotional responsibility or mutual care, and reinforcing the objectification and devaluation of women. This also serves as a typical manifestation of misogyny.¹⁹³

The business elite mentioned above is also shown as selfish in sexual encounters,

¹⁹² Huaxiaoo, “Dangliuzi jingyingnan tanji lianaiguan [When the overseas-educated elite man talks about his views on relationships, 当留子精英男谈及恋爱观],” Douyin, July 12, 2024, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/1MkOHR-kths/>.

¹⁹³ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī*, 2.

refusing to use protection and implying that his partner should take emergency contraception, thereby transferring the reproductive burden entirely onto the woman.¹⁹⁴ Huaxiaoo's depiction suggests a direct link between emotional neglect and the reduction of women to sexual commodities. A comparable attitude appears in Huaxianbei's imitation of the live-streamer "Big Brother" (大哥, *dage*), who boasts about his sexual experiences while flaunting the hickey marks on his neck, claiming that he "has been with several women but truly loved only one."¹⁹⁵ In this portrayal, women and past relationships are treated merely as ornaments to validate the man's masculinity and social standing. Thus, behind men's seemingly harmless bravado and self-praise lie the experiences of emotional injury endured by women in unbalanced and toxic relationships, including, perhaps, the very women creators who expose such dynamics through their impression comedy videos.

Sociologists Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman contend that power operates not only through large-scale hierarchies but also through the micropractices of everyday life that shape the normative and normalizing codes of gender and other forms of oppression.¹⁹⁶ The videos created by women imitating greasy men can therefore be understood as a form of humor that targets these micro-level practices of structural inequality. By emphasizing behavioral and linguistic nuances, these creators reveal and reinterpret the everyday enactments of gender relations that reflect broader systems of social power.

To synthesize the points made above, we can assert that the trend of women imitating

¹⁹⁴ Huaxiaoo, "Dangnihe jingyingnan yuehuile sancihou [After you have gone on three dates with the business elite, 当你和精英男约会了三次后]," Douyin, June 30, 2024, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/pAuzyOL48qw/>.

¹⁹⁵ Huaxianbei, "Nanren xiangjiu yuelao yuechun [Men are like fine wine; the older they get, the more refined they become, 男人像酒 越老越纯]," Douyin, July 10, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/umLmWCOT-nM/>.

¹⁹⁶ Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 230.

greasy men vividly exposes the gender tensions embedded within mainland China's social order. The broad array of characters and storylines portrayed by these creators not only demonstrates women's creativity and comic intelligence but also mirrors the injustices they endure—being sexualized, objectified, or confined within unequal and controlling relationships. Through expressive impersonation and comic performance, these women illuminate the daily expressions of men's overconfidence, misogyny, and fragile masculinity. What seems at first to be lighthearted mimicry becomes, in practice, a collective commentary on the asymmetrical gender hierarchy. The humor that captures the “whole life of greasy men” is thus inseparable from the real emotional and social pain experienced by women. Its power lies precisely in this dual quality: while it invites laughter, it also exposes collective wounds, resonating with thousands of women who recognize their own experiences in these portrayals.

1.2. Men as the Butt of the Joke in Women's Humor

Within the trend of women imitating greasy men, some creators collaborate, jointly depicting male characters within the same video. For instance, Fang Touming and another creator, Tiantian (恬恬), performed as two men leering at women in an elevator.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, several creators assume both male and women roles within their work. For example, in her nine videos, Miaocuijiao portrayed men and women engaged in debates reflecting opposing viewpoints. However, as the data indicate, this type of performance

¹⁹⁷ Fang Touming, “Buxiaoxin zhuangdao nilo xiaomeintū”.

remains less common. The majority of videos adopt a monologue format and a single-shot structure, centering on the imitation of greasy men with straightforward plots. This approach accentuates the behavior and speech of the greasy man, positioning him as the exclusive target of scrutiny and ridicule, without the distraction of other characters. In this sense, greasy men serve as the unambiguous butt of the joke, while women occupy the roles of both creator and performer. The very act of women crafting humor that turns men into its subject is, in itself, a meaningful social development that should not be viewed as self-evident.

Research by communication scholars Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish shows that women have historically been the butt of jokes for centuries, with sexist humor remaining a core feature of patriarchal cultures.¹⁹⁸ As discussed in the background section of this thesis, comedy in mainland China has long maintained an exclusionary tradition that marginalizes women. Women have seldom been acknowledged as legitimate creators or even as active audiences of comedy, and instead have often been reduced to powerless figures of mockery. According to Kuipers's framework, as in many patriarchal societies, the "humor regimes" in mainland China have long been governed by a male-dominated order that ridicules and sidelines women.¹⁹⁹ Men have traditionally held far greater authority to joke and to be humorous than women, yet they themselves have remained largely off-limits as subjects of ridicule.²⁰⁰ This long-standing imbalance, however, now shows early signs of disruption.

The first and most immediate outcome of this transformation is the backlash of men's anger and resistance. Since the rise of women stand-up comedians whose jokes target men

¹⁹⁸ Shifman and Lemish, "Between Feminism and Fun(ny)ism", 872.

¹⁹⁹ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 69.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

have gained viral attention, many male audiences have expressed pronounced discomfort. For example, Chu Yin (储殷), a former professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of International Relations, has been a vocal critic of women's humor that satirizes men. He argued that "now whatever men say is wrong", accusing online women of judging others solely through the lens of gender and condemning creators like Yang Li for aggravating gender antagonism while allegedly provoking women audiences to attract attention and profit.²⁰¹ Following the viral success of the greasy man imitation trend, many male viewers also reported feeling offended. Some contended that these videos expose women's double standards, claiming that women are lenient toward themselves yet harshly critical of men, and that they interpret men's actions through an arrogant or prejudiced perspective.²⁰² Others went further, accusing women creators of demonizing male behavior in their portrayals of sexual harassment, suggesting that such representations might cause men to fear false accusations and consequently restrict their personal freedom.²⁰³

Although these criticisms are widespread, they are largely unfounded and, in fact, reveal how many male viewers overlook women's lived realities. As discussed in the previous section, it is not men but women who have long been subjected to disproportionate scrutiny, suppression, and moral judgment. The vigilance and criticism directed at sexual harassment are far from excessive when compared with the gravity and pervasiveness of the issue. Yet many men remain unaware of the anxiety and distress that constant exposure to harassment

²⁰¹ Chengyusan (橙雨伞), "Weile zhengming yangli shiduide, chuyin yonggan zhanle chulai [Chu Yin Courageously Stepped Forward to Prove That Yang Li Was Right, 为了证明杨笠是对的, 储殷勇敢站了出来]," *Huxiu News*, September 18, 2020, <https://m.huxiu.com/article/383169.html>.

²⁰² @IkE5G and @Weezyw, May 22, 2023, comment on Huangguaqishui (黄瓜汽水), "Zaidouyin, nüxing jiti chuanguzoule youninan de yisheng".

²⁰³ @rUOgL, May 22, 2023, comment on Huangguaqishui (黄瓜汽水), "Zaidouyin, nüxing jiti chuanguzoule youninan de yisheng."

creates for women. In response to these critiques, one online user (@福尔摩酥酥酥) posted twelve photographs capturing men's lecherous gazes in everyday situations, adding the caption, "Fang Touming's imitation was still too conservative".²⁰⁴

In reality, the discomfort expressed by men who claim to feel "offended" or "misrepresented" often reflects not an experience of genuine injustice but a destabilization of long-standing gender privilege. For generations, men have occupied the dominant position within humor regimes, shaping the narratives and determining who becomes the subject of ridicule. The erosion of this dominance, therefore, brings with it a sense of disorientation and loss. Yet this loss does not constitute unfairness; rather, it forms part of a broader social shift toward equity, in which those historically privileged must relinquish part of their authority to those who were once the targets of laughter.

This raises further questions about why the loss of dominance within humor regimes becomes so intolerable and what it means to become the object of laughter. According to Bergson, being laughed at produces a profound sense of humiliation and exclusion.²⁰⁵ Unlike serious discourse, humor does not require fidelity to truth or intent. By its very nature, humor is playful, performative, and often exaggerated, which allows it to be more biting, insulting, or demeaning than ordinary speech.²⁰⁶ As Kuipers and Holm's research on the tension between humor and dignity demonstrates, laughter often signifies that someone's self-respect or beliefs have been unsettled or questioned.²⁰⁷ Even when humor does not operate as explicit

²⁰⁴ @Fuermosusususu (@福尔摩酥酥酥), "Fang touming paide haishi taibaoshou le [Fang Touming's imitation was still too conservative, 方头明拍得还是太保守了]," Weibo, May 4, 2023, <https://weibo.com/6154728572/4897672131249089>.

²⁰⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 7.

²⁰⁶ Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 12.

²⁰⁷ Giseline Kuipers, "Satire and Dignity," 20.

criticism, it can still threaten the dignity of its target and diminish that person's capacity to participate freely in public discourse.²⁰⁸ As discussed earlier, men place immense importance on manhood and masculinity, often regarding them as symbols of inherent superiority. When these values are humorously exaggerated or satirized, their sense of dignity is disrupted, and both collective and individual confidence as men are shaken. Moreover, humor is inherently exclusive. Those who create and share jokes laugh through shared understanding and common experience, forming a kind of social bond through collective amusement. Those who cannot laugh (or, who become the target of laughter) are excluded from that shared circle and are thus transformed into "others," a process that easily produces discomfort and alienation.²⁰⁹ Within the trend of women imitating greasy men, men are not only excluded from the community of women creators and viewers but also become the very subjects of their laughter. They are simultaneously humiliated and demeaned, as well as excluded and marginalized, a condition especially intolerable for a group historically accustomed to social and cultural dominance.

Interestingly, this male anger has itself become a source of humor, provoking further ridicule from women creators and audiences. In early May 2023, at the height of the greasy man imitation trend, a new subgenre emerged: videos that mocked men who expressed outrage over being imitated. Examples include Shajie, whose video accumulated 376,000 likes²¹⁰ Xu Jie'er with 221,000 likes,²¹¹ and Meidakea with 358,000 likes.²¹² Even Zhou

²⁰⁸ Nicholas Holm, "Humour versus Dignity in the Public Sphere," 42.

²⁰⁹ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 70.

²¹⁰ Shajiehelaowangdeyichang (鲨姐和老王的异常, @2191887835), "Episode 34," Douyin, May 4, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/b9UcCUQ1WWY/>.

²¹¹ Xujieer (徐洁儿, @jieer_0418), "Wo shuoliangju a, wo jue de zhende meibiyao [Let me just say something, I really don't think it's necessary, 我说两句啊, 我觉得真的没必要]," Douyin, May 6, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video,

Yingjun's first video on this topic belongs to this category.²¹³ In these performances, women creators furrow their brows, strike exaggeratedly "charming" poses, and lower their voices while asking whether so many greasy men truly exist in reality. They parody male commenters who accuse women of overgeneralizing and exploiting gender issues for online visibility. The irony of these videos lies in their subtext: the men's defensive reactions and condescending attempts to "correct" women perfectly illustrate the very behavior that defines the greasy man persona.

Whether in the early imitations or the later mockery of men's reactions, women creators consistently turned men into the subjects of humor. Their supporters accused outraged men of being "oversensitive", "fragile", and "lacking a sense of humor", a reversal that mirrored what women themselves had long experienced. Women have historically been portrayed as humorless and unable to appreciate jokes.²¹⁴ This stereotype became particularly prominent when feminists began arguing that traditional sexist humor was not amusing but offensive, and when they protested against its normalization. A widely circulated joke illustrates this stereotype: "How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? — That's not funny." Refusing to accept the comic frame has often been labeled as unpleasant or abrasive.²¹⁵ Those who fail to laugh are viewed by those who do as lacking insight or intelligence, while those who question the humor are dismissed as spoiling the fun or being unable to "take a joke".²¹⁶

<https://v.douyin.com/nmvflAb4Q5E/>.

²¹² Meidakea (美大可啊, @nice922), "Gao yixie nannü duili, zhende meibiyao [Creating conflict between men and women is really unnecessary, 搞一些男女对立, 真的没必要]," Douyin, May 5, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/VBeemjOy3QI/>.

²¹³ Zhou Yingjun, "Zhou yingjun youninan [Zhou Yingjun a Greasy man, 周英俊油腻男]," Douyin, May 2, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/7bgYeKOAhl1s/>.

²¹⁴ Gray, *Women and Laughter*, 8-12.

²¹⁵ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 73.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

In contemporary society, possessing a sense of humor is regarded as an important part of social participation in both public and secular life,²¹⁷ so to claim that a person or group “has no sense of humor” implies that they are unintelligent, insincere, or even inhuman, lacking the ability to use humor as a mode of communication.²¹⁸ Moreover, when women express anger or objection, they are often labeled with gendered and stereotypical terms such as “irrational”, “emotional”, or “hysterical”.²¹⁹

Humor regimes mirror the power dynamics embedded in social hierarchies. As Kuipers observes, it is often difficult for those who are the butt of jokes to respond gracefully to humor. To joke back requires confidence, access, and social capital.²²⁰ Holm likewise notes that individuals with higher social standing and greater authority are less affected by humor that threatens their dignity, whereas those lacking power or already marginalized tend to value dignity more and respond sensitively to such threats.²²¹ Chinese women’s ability to become joke-tellers and comedians, turning men into the targets of humor, arises from the very power and resources they historically lacked. Social media platforms have opened spaces for self-expression, making public comedic performance accessible without the need for institutional approval or elite sponsorship. Videos imitating greasy men are typically produced with minimal resources (often roughly edited and simply costumed) demonstrating that a single idea and a mobile phone can suffice to create viral content. Furthermore, as discussed in the background chapter, the increasing visibility of women comedians on public

²¹⁷ Ibid., 75.

²¹⁸ Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, 4.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

²²⁰ Giseline Kuipers, “The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere,” 74.

²²¹ Nicholas Holm, “Humour versus Dignity in the Public Sphere,” 50.

stages, such as in stand-up comedy programs, has not only challenged the male-dominated structure of China's comedy industry but also inspired many ordinary women to engage in online comedic creation.

More importantly, the feminist movement in China has gained significant momentum in recent years, awakening increasing numbers of women, particularly well-educated young women living in major cities. An expanding online trend has seen women using hashtags on social media to challenge gender discrimination, expose sexual harassment, and resist menstrual stigma. For instance, campaigns such as #AntiAppearanceAnxiety and #RejectingAppearanceAnxiety, which have been used millions of times, represent feminist responses to harmful aesthetic norms that dictate women's appearance.²²² Furthermore, the #MeToo movement, which took shape across multiple Chinese social media platforms, has brought together survivors, activists, and the broader public, promoting awareness and sustained dialogue surrounding sexual harassment and assault.²²³ In addition, gender-related topics have repeatedly sparked nationwide debate, including whether children must adopt their fathers' surnames,²²⁴ and whether the underrepresentation of women in television dramas depicting the fight against Covid-19 effectively erased women's contributions.²²⁵ By catalyzing these discussions, Chinese feminists have sought to challenge the entrenched power structures of patriarchy and to dismantle long-standing customs and beliefs. This

²²² Liu Yaqi, "A Mirror for Men? Feminist Activism of #ImitatingGreasyMen in China," *Communications in Humanities Research* 40 (2024): 27.

²²³ Lin Zhongxuan and Liu Yang, "Individual and Collective Empowerment: Women's Voices in the #MeToo Movement in China," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 119.

²²⁴ Pan Wang, "(Wo)men's Voices, Rights, and the Vision of the State," in *China Story Yearbook 2021: Contradiction*, ed. Linda Jaivin and Esther Sunkyoung Klein with Sharon Strange (Canberra: The Australian National University Press, 2022), 160.

²²⁵ Vivian Wang, "A TV Drama on China's Fight with Covid-19 Draws Ire over Its Depiction of Women," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/20/world/asia/china-tv-women-coronavirus.html>.

growing feminist consciousness has created a more favorable environment for women creators, allowing them to reshape humor regimes and receive stronger support from women audiences.

Within this broader social transformation, men now confront a dual loss of power (that is, both in real life and within humorous discourse) as their traditional privileges are increasingly questioned in the ongoing pursuit of gender equality. As a group long accustomed to advantage within patriarchal systems, men tend to respond to ridicule with heightened defensiveness and resistance, unlike marginalized groups who have historically lacked power to speak back. Much like the helplessness experienced by those marginalized when mocked, men today often find it difficult to joke back effectively. Their angry or indignant responses, rather than restoring dignity, frequently appear stiff and ungraceful, revealing discomfort with the shifting balance of gendered expression.

In summary, women's impression comedy videos portraying greasy men constitute a direct challenge to traditional humor regimes, manifesting in a destabilization which has evolved alongside the wider progress of feminist discourse. Such humor does not silence men; rather, it reveals that masculine identity, especially when rooted in dominance or gender-based prejudice, struggles to endure the experience of being laughed at. Within this context, women's humor functions not as divisive rhetoric but as a diagnostic and reflective tool. It exposes the insecurity that sustains patriarchal power while inviting a reconsideration of more balanced and equitable forms of gender interaction.

1.3. A Relief, Not A Solution

As explored in earlier sections, while social media platforms and the broader development of feminism have objectively created the environment and opportunities for women to imitate greasy men, the subjective motivations behind this trend remain less explored. Why do so many women participate with such enthusiasm? What draws them to this practice, and what significance does it hold in their lives?

This thesis contends that women's participation in this trend represents a form of collective creation. Rather than a single, polished artistic product, it consists of thousands of short, fragmented videos that collectively generate a fluid and evolving cultural phenomenon. Beyond the act of content production, many users also engage by commenting, sharing personal experiences, and reflecting on gender dynamics. Through these ongoing interactions, a digital community of women has formed, one grounded in empathy, shared experience, and mutual understanding of everyday gendered realities.

In the comment sections of Fang Touming's videos, many viewers observed that they personally knew men who behaved in similar ways. One viewer wrote, "I can even remember the name of the boy in my class who acted exactly like this".²²⁶ The audience engaged in animated discussions about the greasy high school boy's tendency to check himself in the mirror during class. One comment sardonically suggested that "the mirror must be a fragment of a broken large mirror",²²⁷ while another added, "or perhaps it is the reflective side of an

²²⁶ @Nostalgique_, March 14, 2023, comment on Fang Touming, "Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia."

²²⁷ @_7C, March 14, 2023, comment on Fang Touming, "Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia."

English textbook CD”.²²⁸ These exchanges show how audiences identify with such details, drawing connections to their own memories and lived experiences. Under Huaxiaoo’s videos, one user commented, “You are watching a comedy, but I am watching a memory”.²²⁹ That single comment received over 400 replies. These interactions demonstrate that the humor in these imitations is deeply rooted in shared social experience. When audiences watch these videos, they often recognize fragments of their own lives. Perhaps more importantly, they realize that they are not isolated in those experiences.

In the comments under a collaborative video by Huaxianbei and Meili Xiaoyizi, which depicts the lecherous stare of a man on the street, the tone of discussion shifted as many women expressed solidarity in response to male viewers who insisted they had “never seen such men” in real life.²³⁰ The comment section was soon filled with remarks such as: “Every guy says he has never done this, but every girl says she has experienced it”,²³¹ and “Women’s situation in this society is completely different from men’s. They do not live under such gazes, so they just cannot understand... We women have been living in this environment since the day we were born”.²³² These comments reflect how collective sharing among women transforms experiences of harassment and intrusive attention into opportunities for validation and healing. When private discomfort becomes a collective feeling, women no longer need to question whether they are being “too sensitive”. Instead, they find relief through recognition

²²⁸ @Shigejiegongshe Hudelu (石圪节公社 胡德禄), March 16, 2023, comment on Fang Touting, “Nimenkan, woqu tuyixia.”

²²⁹ @Shen, April 26, 2023, comment on Huaxiaoo, “Zhegetong, yaoyisheng laizhiyu.”

Huaxiaoo, “Zhegetong, yaoyisheng laizhiyu [This pain takes a lifetime to heal, 这个痛, 要一生来治愈],” Douyin, April 26, 2023, accessed October 3, video, <https://v.douyin.com/AJtwnzsNIU/>

²³⁰ Huaxianbei, “Dangni duzi zoulu yudao women.”

²³¹ @Lllyyyz, May 14, 2023, comment on Huaxianbei and Meili Xiaoyizi, “Dangni duzi zoulu yudao women.”

²³² @Qiji Maxiaotie (奇迹马小铁), May 14, 2023, comment on Huaxianbei and Meili Xiaoyizi, “Dangni duzi zoulu yudao women.”

and emotional resonance.²³³ Such public articulations of personal experience can also be understood as an extension of the broader online #MeToo movement, in which storytelling itself functions as a form of empowerment and mutual care.

Humor and mockery can enable women to release fear and anger, demonstrated in one user's message to Miaocuijiao:

“Thank you for your video. I used to be very afraid of guys like this, and even gradually felt inferior. But after watching your video, when I see this type of man, I just want to laugh.”²³⁴

Echoing Freud's concept of humor as a means of discharging psychological tension, this thesis contends that the trend of imitating greasy men provides women with a sense of psychological relief.²³⁵ In their everyday lives, many have faced harassment, intrusive gazes, and gendered oppression, which often generate feelings of fear, isolation, and self-doubt. Through online humor, however, they reclaim agency by becoming both creators and protagonists, supported by a community of women who share similar experiences. Once men become the objects of laughter rather than its orchestrators, they cease to be figures who evoke intimidation or unease.

This form of humor, created through collective women expression and the imitation of greasy men, not only disrupts existing humor regimes and offers emotional release but also invites further inquiry. Can such humor perform the corrective or subversive functions

²³³ Lin Zhongxuan and Liu Yang, “Individual and Collective Empowerment,” 119.

²³⁴ Miaocuijiao, No title, Douyin, May 23, 2023, accessed October 3, video, <https://v.douyin.com/BOi-61qTPEg/>.

²³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 97.

described by Bergson and Bakhtin, by confronting social conventions and destabilizing traditional hierarchies? Should we, as some second-wave feminists once did, maintain an unshakable optimism about humor's potential to transform social structures? The position of this thesis is more cautious.

This thesis maintains that emotional relief is not equivalent to social resolution. Humor, on its own, cannot meaningfully redress structural gender inequality. As Shifman and Lemish observe, while humor addressing gender can provoke critique and stimulate discussion, it rarely poses a sustained challenge to dominant social orders.²³⁶ The popularity of greasy man imitation videos, therefore, should not be mistaken for a complete subversion of humor regimes or an attainment of gender parity in comedic expression. Women's participation in humor remains constrained by broader cultural limits. The viral appeal of this trend likely stems from the fact that it tackles sensitive gender themes in ways that remain socially permissible, drawing strength from humor's inherent ambiguity and its non-serious, indirect mode of critique.

It is also crucial to recognize that, despite the continued growth of feminist awareness in mainland China, gender issues and feminist discourse still cannot be discussed freely or extensively in public forums. On the eve of International Women's Day in 2015, five feminist activists — Wang Man (王曼), Zheng Churan (郑楚然), Li Tingting (李婷婷), Wei Tingting (韦婷婷), and Wu Rongrong (武嵘嵘) — were detained in Guangzhou and Beijing for organizing a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. They were

²³⁶ Shifman and Lemish, "Between Feminism and Fun(ny)ism," 885.

accused of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble (寻衅滋事)”.²³⁷ In 2018, *Feminist Voices* (女权之声), mainland China’s most influential feminist media outlet, was banned simultaneously from WeChat and Weibo. The WeChat platform cited the Cybersecurity Law, alleging that the account had “disrupted social order, public safety, and national security”.²³⁸ The #MeToo movement, which began to influence China that same year, encouraged many women to publicly share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault.

A prominent case involved a young journalist, Xianzi (弦子), who accused one of China’s most renowned television hosts, Zhu Jun (朱军), of sexual harassment. The case attracted widespread public attention, yet Xianzi’s Weibo account was suspended without clear justification, and many users who reposted messages in her support also faced post deletions and account bans.²³⁹ In 2021, more than ten feminist groups on Douban, another major Chinese social media platform, were forcibly disbanded, and feminist-related terms became prohibited search keywords on the site.²⁴⁰ On Douyin, the very platform where the greasy man imitation trend first gained momentum, several creators who discussed feminist issues in a serious rather than humorous tone also encountered significant resistance. Influencers such as Renren Buxu Cixing (仁仁不虚此行)²⁴¹ and Meimeng Chengzhenzhen (美梦成真真)²⁴² have reported that their accounts were subjected to mass follower removals,

²³⁷ “Nüquan wujiemei beibu shinian, bei jinshenghou dikang ruhe jixu? [Ten Years After the Arrest of the Feminist Five: How Does Resistance Continue After Being Silenced? 女权五姐妹被捕十年 被噤声后抵抗如何继续?]” *DW.com*, September 20, 2025, <https://p.dw.com/p/50Y9x>.

²³⁸ “Metoo xijuan quanqiu zhongguo nüquan quebei jinsheng [As #MeToo Sweeps the World, Feminist Voices in China Are Silenced, MeToo 席卷全球 中国女权却被噤声],” *DW.com*, June 22, 2018, <https://p.dw.com/p/305qD>.

²³⁹ “Nüquan wujiemei beibu shinian, bei jinshenghou dikang ruhe jixu?”

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Renren Buxu Cixing (仁仁不虚此行, @rrbxcx), “Dang nüxing bozhumen bei zidong quguan [When women creators are automatically unfollowed, 当女性博主们被自动取关],” Douyin, July 30, 2025, accessed October 3, video, <https://v.douyin.com/gxbpJfnJUjc/>.

²⁴² Meimeng Chengzhenzhen (美梦成真真, @RealZz1212), “Nüxing bozhu de nianzhong zongjie [Mid-Year Summary of a

temporary suspensions, or even permanent bans. The founder of *Feminist Voices*, Lü Pin (吕频), remarked that there is no longer any social media platform in mainland China that can be considered genuinely supportive of women or feminist discourse.²⁴³

In this restrictive environment, where public expression carries potential risk, an important question arises: why does humor — such as impression comedy that imitates greasy men — appear to enjoy greater tolerance from censorship compared with more direct expressions of opinion? The answer, I would argue, lies in humor's distinctive mode of communication. These imitation videos primarily rely on exaggeratedly comic representations of male behavior while deliberately avoiding overt statements or explicit argumentation. The creators position themselves as performers rather than commentators, allowing the audience to form their own judgments. Humor, by its nature, is non-serious, ambiguous, and interpretively open. It resists definitive meaning and invites multiple, even conflicting, interpretations.²⁴⁴ Given this inherent slipperiness, humor enables creators to express critique indirectly while maintaining plausible deniability. Any reading that attributes political or social criticism can be easily refuted, and creators can withdraw behind the familiar defense that “it is just a joke,” thereby disclaiming serious intent.²⁴⁵ As Kuipers observes, humor always leaves space for the denial of meaning and for the avoidance of responsibility.²⁴⁶ Consequently, impression comedy videos imitating greasy men have managed, at least to some extent, to bypass platform-level censorship and scrutiny from

Woman Creator, 女性博主的年中总结],” Douyin, July 10, 2025, accessed October 3, video, <https://v.douyin.com/LmzDUUjNb7E/>.

²⁴³ “Nüquan wujiemei beibu shinián, bei jinshenghou dikang ruhe jixu?”

²⁴⁴ Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, 12.

²⁴⁵ Giseline Kuipers, “The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere,” 70.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

higher authorities, despite their latent critique of gendered power structures.

However, humorous expression is never entirely without risk. When the data collected at the end of 2023 were revisited in 2025, many of the videos had already been deleted. Influencers such as Miaocuijiao had shifted toward safer and more apolitical types of content, such as beauty and fashion. The pressure of censorship, however, had existed since the very beginning of the trend's popularity in 2023. For example, in April 2023, Fang Touming once posted a video portraying a man secretly filming women on the subway. The clip was later shared on another major platform, Weibo, where it trended widely. Yet, the video eventually disappeared from Douyin, perhaps deleted by Fang Touming herself under external pressure, or possibly removed by the platform's moderation system. In navigating these uncertain boundaries of safety, women creators have consciously chosen forms of expression and subject matter that align more closely with what is deemed acceptable within mainstream discourse and the prevailing power structure. As indicated by the data I collected, videos that explicitly address sexual harassment (one of the topics most heavily censored by authorities) constitute only a small portion of the sample, accounting for less than 10%. By contrast, shuai shuai and mansplaining appear far more frequently, at 55.2% and 51.2% respectively. Their dominance may relate not only to women's resonance with these behaviors but also to their relative acceptability from the perspective of censorship. As discussed earlier, these two categories appear less serious and less harmful, and their depiction of gender tensions is more subtle, which perhaps makes them, in the eyes of authorities, less likely to be seen as "disrupting social order and public safety."

In 2025, after the greasy man parody had become an established comedic form, humor

creator Who tf Viola faced several rounds of follower removals and account bans after her videos parodying white men went viral.²⁴⁷ Despite repeatedly creating new accounts, she met the same outcome each time. This situation is especially revealing because her impersonations did not even target Chinese men, yet they were still deemed unacceptable. Such unpredictability reflects how the humor regime remains intact: those in marginalized positions cannot clearly identify where the boundaries of permissible speech lie and must instead navigate them through speculation and careful trial.

In summary, the widespread appeal of greasy man imitation videos rests on humor's entertaining and ambiguous character, as well as the creators' deliberate avoidance of overtly sensitive material. Neither the established humor regimes nor the broader gendered power structures have been fundamentally altered; they continue to restrict women's expressive freedom. More troublingly, even comedic imitation carries the potential for suppression. In this context, it would be unrealistic to assume that women's humor could genuinely challenge or transform the existing structures of power. The trend of imitating greasy men thus represents a form of humor that offers temporary relief rather than meaningful change. While it provides a relatively freer space for women to build community and share emotional release, it still operates within humor regimes that remain fundamentally unchanged.²⁴⁸

The research object, the women-created impression videos of greasy men on Douyin,

²⁴⁷ Who tf Viola (@36797614589), "He, shushu zheshini dijici bei quguan le? [Heh, let's count—how many times have you been unfollowed now? 呵，数数这是你第几次被取关了?]" Douyin, June 15, 2025, accessed October 3, video, <https://v.douyin.com/YHRSbbTnRik/>.

²⁴⁸ Giseline Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 70.

showcases the creativity of women creators and signifies considerable progress in women's participation in public humor. Through exaggerated performances and fragmentary narratives, women creators collectively expose a repertoire of everyday male behaviors that reveals males' precarious manhood and reflect the persistence of gendered power structures. These videos constitute not only a parody of stereotypical masculine performance but also a digital archive of women's shared memories and embodied frustrations. Laughter is transformed into a form of recognition: it converts everyday discomfort into solidarity, and isolation into community connection.

However, the pleasure of laughter coexists with the awareness that the structural inequalities producing such humor remain intact. In a media environment where feminist discourse and activism face systematic suppression, humor survives by adopting strategies of ambiguity and self-irony. Women creators employ comic exaggeration not merely as a stylistic choice but as a survival strategy, masking critique beneath playfulness. The ability to say, "It is just a joke," allows these videos to circulate widely, yet the same non-seriousness dilutes their political force. Consequently, humorous imitation becomes one of the few safe spaces for women's expression, but its safety depends precisely on the maintenance of this ambivalence.

Thus, while humor regimes in mainland China have indeed been somewhat destabilized and women's humor has gained more space than before, the fragility of this advancement must also be acknowledged. The collective laughter forged online is genuine and powerful, yet it exists within boundaries defined by the very power structures it mocks. The imitation videos of greasy men created by women transform personal grievance into shared laughter

and creates fleeting moments of empowerment within an otherwise restricted discursive field.

However, as long as women's humor must rely on ambiguity to evade censorship, its capacity for social transformation will remain limited.

Chapter 2. Between Feminism and Misogyny:

Women's Character Impression Comedy of Women on Douyin

Men are not the sole subjects of imitation by women creators. This chapter examines impression comedy videos in which women mimic other women. Following the timeline of the greasy man imitation trend discussed in the previous chapter, this section also focuses on videos portraying the imitation of women released after 2023. In this comedic mode, women simultaneously assume multiple roles — they are the creators, performers, and the imitated figures. Consequently, the emphasis moves from parodying men to a more introspective engagement among women themselves, encompassing observation, self-reflection, representation, and emotional articulation. This form of imitation exposes a more intricate and layered ecology than that observed in the mimicry of men.

In contrast to the previous chapter, where men's imitation was largely confined to the greasy man persona, the videos featuring women display a far broader spectrum of identities and stylistic approaches. The diversity of these characterizations defies simple categorization. Furthermore, the imitation of women is not necessarily negative or satirical. Many performances exhibit a tone of empathy and respect, employing humor to portray women who are charming, admirable, and relatable. Some of these comedies also form interconnected social narratives centered around women's experiences, depicting a variety of women characters that collectively highlight shared sensibilities and mutual recognition.

Within this framework, the chapter examines feminist-oriented forms of comedy that aim to disengage from the patriarchal lineage of humor. Representative creators and selected

works are analyzed through close reading and contextual interpretation. Set against a cultural backdrop shaped by persistent patriarchal misogyny, the discussion investigates how women represent themselves through imitation, how they negotiate the tension between new feminist consciousness and enduring traditional expectations, and how their performances articulate broader gendered concerns embedded in everyday life.

2.1. Reflections on Misogyny Triggered by the “Ueno Chizuko Fever”

Before proceeding to a detailed examination, it is essential to provide relevant context. Alongside the earlier discussion on the limited progression of feminism and the growing visibility of women comedians, two significant cultural phenomena deserve attention for their influence on how women perceive both themselves and others. These are the so-called “Ueno Chizuko (上野千鶴子) fever” and the widespread circulation of the term *yan nü* (Chinese: 厌女, Japanese: 女嫌い, meaning misogyny) on Chinese social media.

Ueno Chizuko is a Japanese feminist and scholar of gender studies known for her participation in numerous feminist and human rights movements. She has produced a substantial body of accessible scholarship articulating feminist perspectives on Japanese society, culture, literature, and art from a distinctly woman perspective.²⁴⁹ Although her name may be unfamiliar to Western audiences, her intellectual influence extends across East Asia, especially within Japan and China.

²⁴⁹ Itakura Kimie (板倉君枝), “Ueno Chizuko: Japan’s Feminist Icon Gaining International Recognition,” *Nippon.com*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.nippon.com/cn/japan-topics/c03711/>.

In 2019, a speech by Ueno Chizuko at the University of Tokyo addressing gender inequality in Japan's education system gained wide circulation on Chinese social media.²⁵⁰ In this address, Ueno candidly told students — who were often described as the nation's brightest and most hopeful — that “The society that awaits you is one where effort does not necessarily lead to fair rewards”.²⁵¹ Her statement provoked extensive reflection on the persistence of gender inequality among audiences. The complete video, along with its many excerpts, transcripts, and screenshots, has accumulated nearly 1.5 million views and more than 2,500 comments on Bilibili, one of China's most popular long-form video-sharing platforms, frequently referred to as the Chinese equivalent of YouTube.²⁵² After this speech spread online, Ueno's book *Onnagirai: Nippon no Misojinī (Hatred of Women: Japan's Misogyny, 女ざらい: ニッポンのミソジニー)*, first translated into Chinese in 2015, experienced a surge in popularity and reached the height of public attention toward the end of 2022. By 2023, it had gone through more than twenty reprints and became a national bestseller.²⁵³

In the book, Ueno presents a comprehensive interpretation of misogyny, describing it as encompassing both men's contempt for women and women's self-directed hatred. The first form involves the patriarchal belief in male superiority and the social inclination to belittle

²⁵⁰ Furuichi Masako (古市雅子), “Weihe dangjin zhngguo chuxianle yigu shangye qianhezi re? [Why has a ‘Ueno Chizuko fever’ emerged in contemporary China? 为何当今中国出现了一股‘上野千鹤子热’?” *Japan Policy Forum*, August 10, 2023, <https://cn.japanpolicyforum.jp/society/pt202308101421249087.html>.

²⁵¹ Dongjing shuzi youmin xiaolong gugu (@东京数字游民小龙姑姑), “Dongjing daxue ruxueshi - shangye qianhezi zhici [University of Tokyo Entrance Ceremony: Ueno Chizuko's Address, 東京大学入学式-上野千鶴子致辞],” Bilibili, March 16, 2020, accessed October 3, 2025, video, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1T7411f7xu/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=92bee817b30c19e65be91c6f6bc1491f.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Zhang Congcong (张聪聪), “Chuban shichang yinglai xingbie ticai rechao [The Publishing Market Sees a Boom in Gender-Themed Work, 出版市场迎来性别题材热潮],” *Chinawriter*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2023/0315/c403994-32644759.html>.

women — acts that function as discrimination and symbolic violence toward the other.²⁵⁴ Because men do not fear being identified as women, they can objectify and despise women from a distance of assumed safety.²⁵⁵ Women's self-hatred, however, is subtler and more intricate, representing the central concern of Ueno's analysis and the most distinctive element of her contribution. She maintains that the notion of women inferiority is not sustained by men alone; rather, women living under patriarchal conditions often internalize this ideology and sometimes even defend it. The psychological tendency to despise and diminish women originates with the father, or more broadly with patriarchal authority, yet it is often transmitted maternally, from mother to daughter, across successive generations of women.²⁵⁶

Misogyny manifests in numerous concrete ways. For instance, as a result of internalized objectification, women frequently compete with one another for sexual appeal and social validation.²⁵⁷ Some women, attempting to avoid the discomfort of self-hatred, try to distance themselves from gendered expectations by believing they are superior to or fundamentally unlike other women.²⁵⁸ Through these psychological mechanisms, reinforced by entrenched male privilege, women's emotional connections are weakened and often denied within patriarchal structures. While men commonly maintain solidarity through homosocial desire,²⁵⁹ women are discouraged from forming similar bonds. Within the patriarchal order, jealousy, rivalry, and mutual harm are frequently attributed to women, even among close

²⁵⁴ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī*, 141.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 143.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 206.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

²⁵⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 2

relatives such as mothers and daughters.²⁶⁰ As a result, women friendship is imagined as something that should not, or even cannot, exist.²⁶¹

Ueno critiques the deep-seated misogynistic ideology that permeates Japanese literature and art. She particularly targets the novelist Hayashi Mariko (林真理子), whose works frequently center on women protagonists who are beautiful and charming—that is, women perceived as valuable through the male gaze. These characters often exploit their attractiveness to pursue wealth, manipulate emotions, and engage in morally questionable behavior.²⁶² According to Ueno, Hayashi portrays with striking clarity the pettiness and vulgarity of women who “use their femininity as a weapon,” which inevitably leads readers to develop aversion toward them.²⁶³ Ueno argues that Hayashi’s narrative stance adopts a hostile view of women, made possible by her self-positioning as an “exceptional” woman who stands apart from her own gender, thereby observing it from an externalized perspective.²⁶⁴

China and Japan share similar cultural legacies and social conditions, including the enduring influence of Confucianism and the increasingly serious problem of low birth rates. Perhaps because of these parallels, Ueno’s arguments were swiftly embraced by Chinese readers.²⁶⁵ Moreover, Chinese feminist scholar He Guimei (贺桂梅) has noted the presence of a kind of “amnesia” in Chinese feminist theory. Since the early twenty-first century, feminist discourse in China has struggled with theoretical discontinuity and a lack of

²⁶⁰ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī*, 210.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁶⁵ Furuichi Masako, “Weihe dangjin zhngguo chuxianle yigu shangye qianhezi re?”

sustained depth, leaving many women without the intellectual means to articulate the inequalities and hardships they encounter.²⁶⁶ Influential Western feminist theorists, including Judith Butler, have had only limited influence within Chinese academic circles and are even less familiar to the broader public. Although Ueno's ideas are no longer new in global feminist studies, they have offered Chinese readers a framework that is both intellectually engaging and personally illuminating.²⁶⁷ By late 2022, the term *yan nü* (厌女), meaning “misogyny” in Chinese, had become a widely discussed keyword across Chinese online communities.

Publishing data from several presses indicate that Ueno's primary audience in China comprises educated, middle-class women in their twenties and thirties who live in urban areas.²⁶⁸ Many of these readers have begun to recognize that, as women, they too may unconsciously participate in maintaining patriarchal patterns of misogyny. One illustrative example occurred in February 2023, when beauty influencer Yu Youyu (于有鱼), who has more than 950,000 followers, released an unexpected video unrelated to makeup or beauty tutorials. She titled it *My Confession* and explicitly stated that it was inspired by Ueno Chizuko. In the video, she reflected thoughtfully on the misogynistic beliefs she had previously internalized, such as assuming that women's logical thinking was weaker than men's or that youth in women equated to professional incompetence.²⁶⁹ The video attracted

²⁶⁶ Wang Qing (王青), “He guimei: xinshijie, jiuyuyan [He Guimei: New World, Old Language, 贺桂梅: 新世界, 旧语言],” *Xinjingbao*, July 14, 2021, <https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/162623326314345.html>.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Zhang Congcong, “Chuban shichang yinglai xingbie ticai rechao”.

²⁶⁹ Yu Youyu (于有鱼, @yuyouyu33), “Wode chanhuilu [My Confession, 我的忏悔录],” Douyin, February 16, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/ZL198gQh5qg/>.

180,000 likes and over 22,000 comments.²⁷⁰ Critical engagement with misogyny is no longer uncommon, and such debates have increasingly extended into creative expressions in popular media, particularly through short comedic videos.

The comedy videos created by women who imitate other women after 2023 developed within this broader cultural and intellectual context. It is reasonable to suggest that many of these creators, especially those whose videos do not mock or deride the women they portray, were influenced (directly or indirectly) by Ueno Chizuko's ideas. Their work reflects a deliberate attempt to move beyond misogynistic and gender-biased frameworks. This is evident in their conscious recognition and even affirmation of women identity, their rejection of the Hayashi Mariko-style women characters designed to provoke viewers' dislike, and their avoidance of narratives in which women compete with or harm one another in pursuit of sexual value.

In the following section, this thesis applies both content and discourse analysis to examine several representative and widely viewed creators and their most popular videos.

2.2. When Women Become “the First Sex”

At the end of 2024, one of China's most influential woman film directors, Shao Yihui (邵艺辉), commented in a podcast promoting her feminist film *Good Things* (好东西): “I imagined a new world in which woman is the first sex”.²⁷¹ This statement is striking and soon

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Shao Yihui (邵艺辉), Dongjie (洞姐), Kangdi (康堤), and Wang Laoshi (王老师), “Hao Dongxi daoyan Shao Yihui: Xiangxiang yige ‘nǚxing shì dìyīxìng’ de xīn shìjiè [Director Shao Yihui of Good Things: Imagining a New World Where

gained attention among feminist circles across Chinese social media. The expression “woman as the first sex” clearly alludes to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir explains that in patriarchal societies, man functions as the universal subject while woman is constructed as the “Other”.²⁷² he contends that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, implying that woman is defined not by her own existence but by her relation to man. Consequently, man occupies the position of the first sex, and woman the second.²⁷³ Just as Shao seeks to envision an alternative world through her films, the character impression videos produced by Chinese women can similarly be understood through the conceptual framework of “woman as the first sex”.

Unlike stand-up comedy, which centers on personal narrative and the articulation of opinions, character impression comedy is closer to a condensed form of sketch performance. Its practitioners craft short, relatable scenarios by portraying distinct personalities or reenacting familiar everyday moments that elicit laughter through recognition and shared experience. Thus, analyzing impression comedy is meaningful when it is compared to the established tradition of Chinese sketch comedy, a genre historically dominated by men, where they have long functioned as the first sex.

Compared with Xiangsheng, a genre historically dominated by male performers, sketch comedy provides greater opportunities for women to appear on stage and participate in stories drawn from everyday settings such as family, work, or school. Yet within these performances, women and men do not share equal standing. Women characters appear far less frequently,

Woman Is the First Sex, 《好东西》导演邵艺辉：想象一个“女性是第一性”的新世界],” November 23, 2024, in *Zhankai Jiangjiang* (展开讲讲), podcast, MP3 audio, <https://podwise.ai/dashboard/episodes/2354035>.

²⁷² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 16.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 17.

and when they do, they are often confined to comic stereotypes shaped by misogynistic conventions. In many sketches, women become the primary source of humor. Actresses such as Song Dandan and Gao Xiumin frequently portray coarse, foolish rural women whose mistakes generate laughter,²⁷⁴ while Ma Li has depicted a woman official who advances in her career through sexual favors.²⁷⁵ Another recurring comedic device involves contrasting two women—one physically attractive and another ridiculed for her appearance or body type. In *Xile Jie* (*Happy Street*, 喜乐街), for example, the model Qu Ying is set against the plump comedian Jia Ling, inviting laughter at Jia's expense.²⁷⁶ These portrayals reinforce gendered stereotypes that ridicule women's appearance, equate femininity with sexual value, and promote rivalry among women, thereby sustaining a patriarchal comedic framework where women remain the primary objects of ridicule.

Another defining characteristic of traditional sketch comedy is its profound male-centeredness. Male characters not only dominate numerically but are also depicted as “neutral human beings,” whose gender is presumed and seldom highlighted. They are granted the authority to represent universal human experience rather than being identified specifically as men. Male roles exhibit considerable variety and are typically portrayed through their social or occupational identities rather than domestic ones. They may appear as farmers (Zhao Benshan in *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*), factory workers (Huang Hong in *Blowing the Balloon*), police officers (Zhou Wei in *Street Guardian*), actors (Chen Peisi in *The Protagonist and the Supporting Role*), or chefs (Fan Wei in *Selling Crutches*). These men

²⁷⁴ Zhang and Zhou, “Fun Young Ladies”, 3.

²⁷⁵ Fu Yiqin, “China’s TV Spectacular Was Spectacularly Misogynistic.”

Shen Teng, et al., “Touqi suohao.”

²⁷⁶ Jia Ling, et al., “Xile jie.”

occupy central positions in both narrative development and decisive action, with the humor surrounding them often derived from their personalities, work, or social circumstances rather than their gender. As narrative leads, they are rarely the targets of ridicule. Instead, they are rendered appealing and relatable through multidimensional characterizations and engaging plots. Their charm stems not from foolishness or humiliation, but from their humanity, wit, and emotional complexity, which invite understanding and empathy from audiences.

In contrast, women characters seldom occupy central narrative roles. They generally react to male protagonists' actions and are consistently framed through gendered attributes. For instance, in the well-known sketch *Selling Crutches*,²⁷⁷ Zhao Benshan plays the swindler and Fan Wei the victim, forming a complete comic structure before any women presence is introduced. The only woman, Gao Xiumin, appears solely as Zhao's wife and assistant—her character defined entirely by gender. Similarly, in *Street Guardian*,²⁷⁸ the two male leads, a traffic officer and a drunk driver, carry the story's progression, where gender remains irrelevant. Only in the latter half does the woman driver Shasha appear, characterized as an attractive yet naïve figure who becomes involved in a romantic subplot with the officer. By the narrative's conclusion, she transitions from an independent driver to the officer's fiancée. Her role evolves from a potential protagonist to a romantic accessory, reaffirming the secondary and gender-bound status of women in patriarchal sketch comedy.

In short, within the framework of traditional Chinese sketch comedy, men are depicted as embodiments of humanity itself — figures endowed with universal traits who propel the

²⁷⁷ Zhao Benshan, et al., “Maiguai [Selling Crutches, 卖拐]”, CCTV Gala, December 25, 2013, video, https://youtu.be/IaVB_Y3WSFA?si=u3xrA_ai9WSnIdYZ.

²⁷⁸ Zhou Wei, et al., “Jietou weishi [Street Guardian, 街头卫士]”, CCTV Gala, January 14, 2016, video, <https://youtu.be/9xaGY8D4-m0?si=oaQpzIWlyFM4hB7I>.

central narrative. Women, by contrast, are represented as “not men”, a distinctly gendered category whose thoughts, behavior, and personalities are interpreted through the prism of femininity. Once a woman appears, her gender becomes her defining characteristic, distinguishing her from the “neutral” human standard and relegating her to the narrative margins. This distinction recalls Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that, within patriarchal structures of representation, men are permitted to personify the human condition, while women exist only in relation to them — as difference, spectacle, or the object of laughter.

For impression comedy to break from the patriarchal and misogynistic framework that has long governed traditional humor, it must transcend these inherited conventions. If the imitation of *greasy men* destabilizes the existing order by transforming men into the targets of ridicule, the videos analyzed in this section instead reposition women at the center of the stage. They present women as the first sex, that is, figures of agency, initiation, and creative force, who drive the comedic narrative forward.

A compelling illustration of this shift appears in a series of imitation videos by the Douyin creator Gugumi (菇菇米), who humorously portrays children.²⁷⁹ Beginning on January 16, 2025, she started producing short clips that mimic the mannerisms and speech patterns of young children. By October 2025, she had released forty-eight such videos and attracted nearly 1.5 million followers. Her attention to children’s behavior is meticulous, and her imitations are both vivid and precise, prompting many viewers to experience nostalgia for their own childhoods. For example, she captures moments when children repeatedly ask their

²⁷⁹ Gugumi (菇菇米, @1694795638), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://v.douyin.com/exKpyFeN1-Y/>.

mothers whether a television character is “a good person or a bad person”, or fidget restlessly, lying on the floor while watching TV.²⁸⁰ To construct these everyday scenes, Gugumi also takes on adult roles such as mothers, teachers, and shopkeepers, producing a lively and humorous depiction of family and social interactions.

Interestingly, Gugumi portrays every character using her own physical appearance (as figure 4). The variations in costume and hairstyle simply distinguish one character from another (child or adult) but not male from female. For instance, some of the children wear two braids, others a ponytail, while the “mother” character leaves her hair down; yet all retain Gugumi’s signature long-haired look. Regardless of age, the costumes project little sense of gender distinction: no skirts or high heels appear, only casual T-shirts and pants in slightly



Figure 4. Gugumi imitating the mother, the child, the aunt characters in her Douyin sketches. Screenshots by the author. Source: Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou gen mama yiqi kan dianshi,” Douyin, February 18, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/PD5wIV6onQk/>. Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou faxian de da-ren ‘youzhi’ shunjian[,” Douyin, April 6, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/Q0drK4IrUkw/>.

²⁸⁰ Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou gen mama yiqi kan dianshi [When I watched TV with my mom when I was little, 我小时候跟妈妈一起看电视],” Douyin, February 18, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/PD5wIV6onQk/>.

varied styles. In the comment section of one of her videos, Gugumi remarked that she once took out the trash in her filming outfit, and a neighbor quipped, “You’ve dressed like that since you were a kid,” implying that the style reflects her personal taste.²⁸¹ In this sense, all her characters can be interpreted as extensions of her own identity as a woman. Gugumi also makes no effort to disguise the genders of her characters. Through terms such as “mom”, “auntie”, and “sister”, it is evident that these figures are women. However, Gugumi has never explained why boys are absent from her videos.

This creative approach parallels the logic frequently found in male-centered works, where, unless otherwise indicated, all characters are presumed to share the creator’s gender. When there is no perceived need for a second sex, those figures are simply left unrepresented. For Gugumi, creating and differentiating between genders within her sketches appears to hold little significance, and judging from audience reactions, viewers share the same indifference. The absence of gender distinction does not reduce the humor or precision of her portrayals. Online commenters praise her playfully, with remarks such as, “It feels like she’s been in elementary school for two hundred years”.²⁸² No one challenges her creative choices or asks, “Where are the boys?” or “Why are there no men?” Gugumi’s videos exemplify what creative expression can become when woman is situated as the absolute first sex. Her imitation of girls functions as a representation of the universal state of childhood — and even of humanity itself — rather than a display of traits exclusive to girls.

²⁸¹ Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou nage suanbushang ‘hao pengyou’ de tongxue [The classmate from my childhood who didn’t really count as a ‘good friend’, 我小时候那个算不上‘好朋友’的同学],” Douyin, September 15, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/7tKkJkBgCcE/>.

²⁸² @Qingshan yingrushu (青山应如适), September 15, 2025, comment on Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou nage suanbushang ‘hao pengyou’ de tongxue.”

Yet this artistic position is not easily achieved by most creators or performers. Although depicting gender differences is often necessary to construct believable social settings, few can, like Gugumi, embody women figures through a natural, unselfconscious presence. Women characters frequently remain bound by excessive gendering, even when portrayed by women themselves. The sketch *Street Guardians* provides a useful example.²⁸³ In its first half, the two male characters (a traffic officer and a drunk driver) are defined primarily by their professional identities, temperaments, and emotional dispositions, all of which belong to the social rather than the gendered sphere. Their masculinity functions as an unspoken given, requiring no deliberate enactment or visual emphasis.

By contrast, when the woman driver Shasha enters in the latter half, this “neutral” privilege disappears (as figure 5). She wears high heels, a pink sweater, and tight skirts paired



Figure 5. Costumes of male and female characters in *Street Guardian*. Screenshot by the author. Source: Zhou Wei, et al., “Jietou weishi,” CCTV Gala, January 14, 2016, video, <https://youtu.be/9xaGY8D4-m0?si=oaQpzIWlyFM4hB7I>.

²⁸³ Zhou Wei, et al., “Jietou weishi.”

with a black rhinestone-studded scarf — an outfit considerably more stylized than those of her male counterparts. Moreover, her femininity is accentuated through overtly theatrical performance: her voice becomes more delicate than her usual tone, and her gestures take on an affected coyness that borders on parody. Even though Han Xue (韩雪), the actress portraying Shasha, is already conventionally beautiful and embodies traditional feminine grace, she appears compelled to amplify gender itself, performing femininity rather than simply appearing as a woman.

This phenomenon directly recalls Judith Butler's argument that gender is not an intrinsic essence but a social construct shaped through continuous repetition of gestures, speech, and actions.²⁸⁴ Within patriarchal structures that position woman as the second sex, women stage characters must assert their presence through heightened displays of gendered signs. Consequently, they are compelled to "perform" (or rather to endlessly "repeat" and "cite") the socially sanctioned scripts of femininity, while men, as representations of the "neutral human," remain exempt from such performance.

Gugumi avoids the repetitive enactment of exaggerated femininity and does not model her characters on any "idealized image" of womanhood. The way she lives and expresses herself as a woman in everyday life informs the portrayal of her women characters, and conversely, those portrayals shape her vision of what the "general human" looks like. This creative reciprocity reflects Gugumi's full acceptance of her womanhood and her conscious departure from misogynistic artistic structures. She neither rejects her gender nor confines it

²⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 33.

within stereotypes or conventional social expectations.²⁸⁵ Her women characters exist independently rather than in relation to men as the “Other”.

Furthermore, Gugumi’s videos construct a network of affectionate and supportive relationships among mothers and daughters, sisters, and women friends. The central child character, Fang Xiaogu (方小菇), has a gentle, loving mother who gazes at her warmly, tolerates her mischief and carelessness, and patiently answers her endless questions, such as repeatedly asking during a trip how long it will take to arrive.²⁸⁶ Within this family setting, the mother has an older sister, and together they often take the children on outings, sharing stories and recalling their own childhood experiences.²⁸⁷ At school, Fang Xiaogu’s closest companion is Wang Yumi (王玉米); the two girls have sleepovers, play mischievous games, and occasionally get scolded by their teachers.²⁸⁸ Fang Xiaogu’s mother also maintains a warm friendship with her best friend, whom Fang affectionately calls her “fairy godmother.” This friend frequently invites them home, preparing gifts and snacks for the children.²⁸⁹

One viewer aptly commented, “Gugumi’s elementary school world is so adorable. All the adults are so normal it feels almost dreamlike, with a sense of comfort that’s like a matriarchal society”.²⁹⁰ Gugumi’s work represents a complete departure from the

²⁸⁵ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī*, 141.

²⁸⁶ Gugumi, “Xiaoshihou mama dai wo changtu zidongyou [When I was little, my mom took me on a long road-trip, 小时候妈妈带我长途自驾游],” Douyin, August 25, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/vKwGZcLnat0/>.

²⁸⁷ Gugumi, “Wo xiaoshihou faxian de da-ren ‘youzhi’ shunjian [The moment I discovered adults’ “childishness” when I was little, 小时候我发现的大人的“幼稚”瞬间],” Douyin, April 6, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/Q0drK4IrUkw/>.

²⁸⁸ Gugumi, “Xiaoshihou haopengyou lai wo jia zhu [When I was little, a good friend came to stay at my house, 小时候好朋友来我家住],” Douyin, June 25, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/wzZWnEvcIIA/>.

²⁸⁹ Gugumi, “Xiaoshihou mama dai wo qu ta pengyou jia wan [When I was little, my mom took me to her friend’s house to play, 小时候妈妈带我去她朋友家玩],” Douyin, August 9, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/jSdcXrGGoT8/>.

²⁹⁰ @Youroumamamama (有肉吗吗吗吗), “Gugumi yingzao de xiaoxuesheng shijie zhende haomeng a [Gugumi’s elementary school world is so adorable, 菇菇米创造的小学生世界真的好萌啊],” Weibo, August 2, 2025,

misogynistic logic that denies the possibility of solidarity among women and assumes that jealousy or rivalry for male attention is inevitable. Her videos instead depict a world that functions without men, a childlike world sustained by affection, empathy, and care among women.

A comparable creator is Xiaoxiao Xuejie (潇潇学姐), a Douyin influencer active on the platform for over five years, with a following of 11.79 million users.²⁹¹ Her ongoing series centers on school life, featuring imitations of teachers as the primary characters. Similar to Gugumi, she portrays all her characters (teachers and students alike) using her natural appearance, where gender distinction plays only a minimal role.

Unlike Gugumi, however, Xiaoxiao Xuejie's videos present women not only with a minimized gender identity but also with distinct social characteristics. The teachers who serve as central figures in her series vary greatly in personality and are situated within intricate interpersonal relationships. They operate outside the domestic framework; they are not portrayed as anyone's mother or wife but as independent women with full professional lives. Xiaoxiao Xuejie also engages directly with the complexities of workplace dynamics. In one of her most popular videos, an ordinary teacher anxiously attempts to decipher the principal's intentions, overanalyzing even the simplest comments.²⁹² She also stages moments of conflict among women teachers, such as a scene in which one reprimands another for

<https://weibo.com/2531438334/5195022947582163>.

²⁹¹ Xiaoxiao Xuejie (潇潇学姐, @ladyman1998), Douyin Homepage, Douyin, accessed October 3, 2025, https://v.douyin.com/NOHZQ2_wwfc/.

²⁹² Xiaoxiao Xuejie, "Zheng xiaozhang: Gang kaixue haizi men xuexi taidu ke zhen hao a! [Principal: At the start of the term the children's learning attitude is really good! 正校长: 刚开学孩子们学习态度可真好啊!]," Douyin, February 3, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/lZLJvE8SJE/>.

revealing too many personal details during class.²⁹³ Yet these tensions are framed as universal aspects of human interaction rather than as disputes “between women”, and certainly not as competitions driven by sexual value or male attention.

In summary, this form of imitation comedy — that is, one that situates women as the first sex — embodies humor liberated from misogynistic and gender-discriminatory conventions. It represents a creative effort by women to challenge and reshape the inherited traditions of comedy. Moreover, because it avoids direct expressions of anger or explicit critiques of patriarchy, it encounters far less censorship than the greasy man trend, allowing creators such as Xiaoxiao Xuejie to gain extraordinary popularity with tens of millions of followers. At the same time, this very neutrality reveals its limited capacity for disruption. Rather than directly confronting gendered hierarchies, this style of comedy constructs a symbolic safe space in which women are treated simply as human beings, not as the second sex. As Shao Yihui has observed, this woman-centered world “deviates slightly from reality, yet brings with it care, visibility, strength, warmth, and humor”.²⁹⁴

2.3. “Old Money Single Mommy”: A Cyber Mother to Long For

2.3.1. A Lovely Heroine and Her Thought-Provoking Words

This section examines the work of the creator Bacardiiaiiiiii, a dynamic and well-liked

²⁹³ Xiaoxiao Xuejie, “Zhe Meng jie za de le? Bu li ren ne... [What’s up with Ms. Meng? She’s not talking to anyone... 这孟姐咋的了？不理人呢],” Douyin, September 29, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, https://v.douyin.com/rXS_lqbAkkM/.

²⁹⁴ Shao Yihui (邵艺辉), Dongjie (洞姐), Kangdi (康堤), and Wang Laoshi (王老师), “Hao Dongxi daoyan Shao Yihui: Xiangxiang yige ‘nuxing shi diyixing’ de xin shijie.”

Douyin performer with nearly 900,000 followers. She maintains an exceptionally high posting frequency, uploading new content every one to three days.²⁹⁵ As noted earlier, she has also produced a series of twenty-six videos imitating greasy men, focusing on the persona of a “business tycoon” (金融大鳄). Her comedic style resembles that of Huaxiao and Zhou Yingjun. Even during this earlier phase, she displayed one of her defining strengths — her fluent English and her humorous, precise imitation of the speech rhythm and accent characteristic of American-born Chinese when speaking Mandarin interspersed with English. The greasy man she portrays exudes a sense of superiority tied to his overseas background. However, in her subsequent series of videos imitating women, although the protagonist retains a similar bilingual speech pattern, she exhibits a markedly different personality.

This woman character is identified by Bacardi as “old money single mommy” (单身老钱妈咪), or more casually, “old money mommy”. She is portrayed as a caring mother born into a multigenerational wealthy family who raises a son and a daughter independently after divorce. Depicted as a Chinese American woman who was born and raised in the United States, she continues to live there with her children. Such a narrative premise naturally provokes curiosity among viewers about her personality and her relationship with her children. This thesis selects the ten most popular videos from this series for close analysis to explore how this “mommy” figure is represented and to consider why she resonates so strongly with audiences.

The filming style of these videos closely mirrors that of the greasy man imitation series. The creator performs solo throughout, addressing the camera directly as though speaking to

²⁹⁵ Bacardi, Douyin Homepage.

an interlocutor. Each video begins with the caption “Rebirth: My Mother Is an Old Money Single Mommy” (重生之我妈是单身老钱), which positions the audience as the child. Viewers are thus invited to assume the role of the son or daughter listening to the “mommy” figure. Consistent with this childlike viewpoint, the camera is angled slightly upward, in contrast to the eye-level framing common in the greasy man videos (as figure 6). This perspective aligns with the gaze of a child, enhancing the realism and immersive quality of the scene. The dialogue between the “mommy” and her child often contains moral or educational moments, allowing Bacardiiaiiiiii to embed her ideas naturally within the flow of conversation. Her tone remains calm and nurturing, without the rigidity of moral instruction, reflecting the demeanor of a parent who guides through empathy and everyday wisdom.



Figure 6. Bacardiiaiiiiii imitating the old money mommy; the camera angle corresponds to a child’s perspective. Screenshots by the author. Source: Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Shaoye xingyixing yaoqu shang mashu le,” Douyin, March 7, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/HkoteXoY7v4/>. “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la!” Douyin, March 10, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/Uk6FzfUZq0k/>. Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Adrian fangjian de yongchi ni call yixia guanxia jiejie mafan ta qing ren lai qingli yixia,” Douyin, March 22, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, https://v.douyin.com/zL7IV3Su_i8/.

For instance, the “mommy” emphasizes the value of independence, reminding her son that, although the family employs domestic helpers, he must still manage his own responsibilities and learn to care for himself — “you should know how to be an adult”.²⁹⁶ Although she has the financial capacity to afford luxury items, she teaches her daughter not to compare herself to others over material possessions, encouraging a grounded attitude toward wealth and status.²⁹⁷ Moreover, in at least four videos included in this analysis, the “mommy” actively communicates ideas of social equality. While she belongs to a privileged class, she neither displays arrogance nor detachment. She instructs her children not to look down upon workers such as drivers or nannies, reminding them that these individuals contribute their labor to sustain the household and therefore deserve respect and gratitude.²⁹⁸ In one video, when her son behaves rudely toward the housekeeper, Maam Lim, the “mommy” firmly corrects him, stressing that such disrespectful conduct is unacceptable.²⁹⁹

Beyond issues of social-class equality, gender equality forms another central aspect of the mommy’s discourse. When discussing career aspirations with her son, she remarks that although Maam Lim’s job appears limited to household chores, it is in fact complex and demanding, requiring both physical endurance and intellectual engagement.³⁰⁰ Her comment

²⁹⁶ Bacardiiaiiiiiii, “Shaoye xingyixing yaoqu shang mashu le [Young master, wake up. It’s time for your horseback riding lesson, 少爷醒一醒要去上马术了],” Douyin, March 7, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/HkoteXoY7v4/>.

²⁹⁷ Bacardiiaiiiiiii, “Angelina, zhexie shechipin chengwei fuhao shi yinwei ni xuanze le tamen, er bushi tamen taigao ni de jiazhi [Angelina, these luxury goods become symbols because you choose them, not because they elevate your value, Angelina 这些奢侈品成为符号是因为你选择了他们 而不是它们抬高你的价值],” Douyin, March 12, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/5V9aW3nVsJY/>.

²⁹⁸ Bacardiiaiiiiiii, “Jacob ni kaolyu hao shi gongwu cang haishi zhijie jet le ma? [Jacob, have you decided whether to take business class or just take the jet? Jacob 你考虑好是公务舱还是直接 jet 了嘛?],” Douyin, March 15, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/gZ46FKcVDtU/>.

²⁹⁹ Bacardiiaiiiiiii, “Jacob mama jintian feichang yansu gen ni taolun zhege wenti [Jacob, mommy is going to discuss this matter with you very seriously today, Jacob 妈妈今天非常严肃跟你讨论这个问题],” Douyin, March 19, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/W5In1KvP4Z4/>.

³⁰⁰ Bacardiiaiiiiiii, “Jacob ni kaolyu hao shi gongwu cang haishi zhijie jet le ma?”

conveys respect for domestic labor while also raising awareness of the broader issue of unpaid housework, which is normalized and predominantly performed by women within patriarchal family systems.³⁰¹ Feminist scholars such as Ann Oakley and Ueno Chizuko have long argued that domestic work—or what Ueno refers to as “reproductive labor”—remains uncommodified, its economic costs absorbed within the household and disproportionately borne by women.³⁰² This structure perpetuates gender inequality, as women devote time and energy to caregiving while simultaneously sacrificing economic independence.³⁰³ When the mommy asserts that housework deserves fair compensation, she not only acknowledges Maam Lim’s value as a worker but also aligns herself with women who perform unpaid labor out of familial obligation and love.

In another video, the mommy addresses gender issues even more explicitly. While flying with her daughter, she speaks to a woman flight attendant about meal choices and comments that she plans to offer feedback to the airline regarding the design of attendants’ uniforms. “Especially for like uniforms, high heels, and stockings,” she notes, “these are quite unnecessary and not suitable for handling emergencies”.³⁰⁴ When this video was released in July 2025, a growing online campaign in China was urging airlines to allow women flight attendants to wear trousers instead of only skirts, and to eliminate requirements for stockings and high heels.³⁰⁵ Advocates argued that women should not be held to stricter “beauty”

³⁰¹ Ann Oakley, “New Introduction,” introduction to *The Sociology of Housework* (reissue; Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018), viii.

³⁰² Chizuko Ueno, *Fuquanzhi yu ziben zhuyi* [Patriarchy and Capitalism, 父权制与资本主义], trans. Zou Yun (邹韵) and Xue Mei (薛梅) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2020), 2.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁰⁴ Bacardiiiiiii, “Jennifer jide he jiejie shuo xiexie o [Jennifer, remember to say thank you to your sister, Jennifer 记得和姐姐说谢谢哦],” Douyin, July 21, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/T1Fj1VknKV8/>

³⁰⁵ Mumajun (木马君), “Kongjie yao bu yao chuan ku zhuang? [Should Flight Attendants Wear Pants?, 空姐要不要穿裤装?],” *Huxiu*, August 6, 2025, <https://m.huxiu.com/article/4661112.html>.

standards than men in professional attire and that practicality, comfort, and safety should take precedence.³⁰⁶ Many women supported the initiative by filling out suggestion forms during flights to express their views.³⁰⁷ By August 2025, several Chinese airlines, including Shandong Airlines, had adopted the proposed changes, offering trouser uniforms for women attendants — a shift influenced in part by online voices like that of Bacardiiaiiiiiii.³⁰⁸

The “old money single mommy’s” exchanges with her children and her thoughtful remarks together shape a multidimensional and deeply relatable women character. She is somewhat talkative and mildly particular, and her Chinese, like that of many American-born Chinese, is less fluent. Yet she remains endearing, gentle, sincere, and nurturing. She teaches her children to act with integrity and to cultivate both moral and intellectual strength. She is not presented as the subject of ridicule but rather as the heart and creative source of humor itself. Consequently, this series departs from those works that rely on stereotypical depictions of women designed to provoke scorn or laughter. Instead, these videos appeal to audiences by inspiring genuine admiration and affection toward the woman protagonist.

2.3.2. Love from the Internet and the Sorrow of Reality

Why, then, do viewers find the “old money mommy” series so captivating? Is it simply because they admire her personality and moral outlook? The answer appears more nuanced.

³⁰⁶ Wu Shuang and Guo Jiali, “Duo hangsi qu gaogengxie hua, zixuan ku-zhuang [Several Airlines Remove High Heels Requirement, Allow Choice of Pants, 多航司‘去高跟鞋化’、自选裤装]”, *CNR News*, August 3, 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/dj/20250803/t20250803_527299458.shtml.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

To explore this question, it is helpful to return to the recurring caption in each video: “Rebirth: My Mother Is an Old Money Single Mommy.” This phrase carries a distinct cultural resonance. Within Chinese online fiction, there exists a subgenre called *rebirth novels* (重生小说), in which protagonists experience a second life under various circumstances. Typically, the new life surpasses the old one in quality, positioning these stories as a form of *wish-fulfillment fiction* (爽文) intended to deliver emotional gratification to readers.³⁰⁹ By adopting this phrase, Bacardiiaiiiiii signals the emotional orientation of her series. Through her vivid portrayal of an upper-class woman, she not only aims to entertain but also to evoke a sense of comfort and joy, offering viewers an imaginative experience akin to a pleasant, idealized dream. The question, then, becomes: what kind of dream does this represent?

Interestingly, the material abundance surrounding the “old money single mommy” may not be the true source of her appeal. In the series’ first episode, while teaching her son about independence, the mommy casually refers to their five-story mansion and various luxury possessions.³¹⁰ At this stage, most audience reactions focused on the spectacle of wealth, with comments such as, “Why is my Douyin suddenly taking me to a rich people’s district?”³¹¹ In the second video, however, the focus shifts. The mommy is shown returning home late at night to fulfill a promise to her daughter. She greets her gently with hugs and kisses, asks whether the siblings have quarreled, and talks about their next travel destination.³¹² This time,

³⁰⁹ Chen Haiyan and Zhang Xinxin, “Kuaigan jizhi, qingnian jiaolü, liaoyu luokong: wangluo chongsheng xiaoshuo de biaocong youxi yu shengceng zhenghou [Pleasure Mechanisms, Youthful Anxiety, and Unfulfilled Healing: The Surface Play and Deep Symptoms of Online Rebirth Novels, 快感机制·青年焦虑·疗愈落空: 网络重生小说的表层游戏与深层症候],” *Ningxia Social Sciences*, no.3(2024): 208.

³¹⁰ Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Shaoye xingyixing yaoqu shang mashu le.”

³¹¹ @Qii-77, August 19, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Shaoye xingyixing yaoqu shang mashu le.”

³¹² Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la! [Princess Angelina, wake up and have your omelet!, Angelina 公主, 起床吃欧姆蛋啦!],” Douyin, March 10, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/Uk6FzfUZq0k/>.

the comments no longer dwell on opulence but on tenderness. One user wrote, “A mommy this gentle would never feel like too much company. My mom just beat me into obedience”.³¹³ Another remarked, “You’re not my mom. Mine would come in, take away my blanket, and say, ‘If you don’t get up now, you can just die there’”.³¹⁴ As more videos appeared, the audience increasingly articulated that what they truly envied was not luxury but emotional connection—the unconditional love, patience, and respect the mommy shows her children. As one viewer noted, “What touched me most was not the wealth but the mommy’s warmth and respect for her children”.³¹⁵ Another added, “So this is what they mean by not needing a lot of money, but needing a lot of love”.³¹⁶

Gradually, as new episodes of the old money mommy series appeared, the comment section began to fill with messages written from the perspective of the “child”. Viewers addressed the “mommy” directly, praised her warmly, and even shared details of their daily lives. Some comments read, “Mommy, I’ve learned to put on false eyelashes by myself”, to which Bacardiiaiiiiii affectionately replied, “You look so beautiful, sweetheart”.³¹⁷ She also began collecting her followers’ English names and selecting one to represent the child’s name in later videos — choosing names such as Angelina, Adrian, Gloria, Christina, and Evelyn. Through this creative exchange, she built for her audience of “cyber children” a vivid, emotionally immersive fantasy of digital motherhood, offering a comforting space where

³¹³ @Daidaishou (呆呆瘦), March 10, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la!”

³¹⁴ @Guguli (咕咕里), August 26, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la!”

³¹⁵ @Beth thinkth, March 15, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Jacob ni kaolyu hao shi gongwu cang haishi zhijie jet le ma?”

³¹⁶ @qinianxue (七年雪), March 10, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la!”

³¹⁷ @huixin gzhuang diqiu zhuangruniu ban (彗星撞地球壮如牛版), October 26, 2025, comment on Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Jacob, ni shi gei ziji zhiding guize de na ge ren.” Bacardiiaiiiiii, “Jacob, ni shi gei ziji zhiding guize de na ge ren [Jacob, you are the one who sets the rules for yourself, Jacob, 你是给自己制定规则的那个人],” Douyin, October 26, 2025, accessed October 29, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/W3xuObPDSVE/>.

affection and identity could be imagined and shared.

According to Ocean Engine Analytics (巨量算数),³¹⁸ 82 percent of Bacardiiiiiii's followers are women, most of whom are between the ages of eighteen and thirty.³¹⁹ Why do these young adult women seek maternal warmth in an online space? What emotional absence or unfulfilled needs in their upbringing does this desire reflect?

It is particularly noteworthy that the age demographic of Bacardiiiiiii's followers significantly overlaps with that of Ueno Chizuko's readership. When Ueno reflected on why her ideas have found such deep resonance in China, she observed that this generation of Chinese women grew up under the One-Child Policy (独生子女政策)^{320,321} As only children, they were spared competition with siblings—especially brothers—for familial resources, and they were often raised in relative financial stability, with parents investing heavily in their education and well-being.³²² Yet this privilege came with an emotional cost, as they also bore the concentrated burden of their parents' expectations.³²³ Cultural scholar Furuichi Masako (古市雅子) has noted that many of their parents belonged to the generation of Red Guards (红卫兵) who came of age during the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命)^{324,325} Having been

³¹⁸ Ocean Engine Analytics is the official data analytics platform of ByteDance, providing reliable statistical information on Douyin creators.

³¹⁹ *Ocean Engine Analytics (巨量算数)*, ByteDance, "Bacardiiiiiii Audience Profile," accessed October 29, 2025, <https://trendinsight.oceanengine.com/arithmetic-index/daren/detail?uid=dihfbfigjihgjegj>.

³²⁰ *The One-Child Policy* was a population control measure implemented in China from 1980 to 2015, limiting most families to having only one child in order to curb rapid population growth.

³²¹ Ueno Chizuko, "Chūgoku de 'Ueno būmu' no wake [Why There Is a 'Ueno Boom' in China, 中国で「上野ブーム」のワケ]," *WAN (Women's Action Network)*, November 3, 2023, <https://wan.or.jp/article/show/10902>.

³²² Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 113.

³²⁴ *The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)* was a decade-long sociopolitical movement initiated by Mao Zedong to reinforce communist ideology. *The Red Guards* were groups of radicalized youth who responded to Mao's call, mobilized across the country to attack traditional culture, intellectuals, and authority figures in the name of revolution.

³²⁵ Furuichi Masako, "Weihe dangjin zhngguo chuxianle yigu shangye qianhezi re? "

denied proper education themselves, they projected enormous value onto their children's schooling, believing it to be the only route to happiness and often equating success in the fiercely competitive *gaokao* (高考, the Chinese college entrance examination) with success in life.³²⁶

On one hand, the steady advancement of gender equality allowed girls to access education and encouraged them to pursue higher learning opportunities.³²⁷ On the other, gender bias remained deeply ingrained within Chinese society. As noted in Chapter 1, while boys frequently received confidence and encouragement, girls continued to face skepticism and undervaluation of their abilities.³²⁸ In one of the world's most populous countries, young women were compelled to exert greater effort than their male peers to gain admission to top universities, leading to adolescence defined by unrelenting academic pressure and the heavy shadow of parental expectations. Within this environment, parents of this generation of girls tended to adopt strict, disciplinarian parenting styles. They valued academic success above all else, often discouraging hobbies or leisure and limiting personal freedom. Girls were seldom permitted to explore independent interests, manage their own time, or even maintain private space, as parents continually monitored whether they were studying diligently.³²⁹

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, and drawing upon Marxist feminist theory, Ueno Chizuko argues that giving birth, nurturing, caring for, and educating children—all activities related to the reproduction of life—constitute reproductive labor. This form of labor, she

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ueno Chizuko, *Onna Girai: Nippon no Misojinī*, 146.

³²⁸ Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie, and Andrei Cimpian, "Evidence of Bias Against Girls and Women in Contexts That Emphasize Intellectual Ability," 1149.

³²⁹ Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*, 122.

notes, is predominantly carried out by women without remuneration within patriarchal family structures.³³⁰ In most Chinese households, the mother is typically the one responsible for instructing, guiding, and disciplining the child. As a result, in many one-child families, the parental dynamic often takes the form of an absent father and a demanding mother. Consequently, in the memories of many daughters, the maternal figure has become closely linked with discipline, rigor, and the heavy weight of expectation within the domestic sphere.

It is therefore unsurprising that this generation of young women feels a profound emotional response when viewing the old money single mommy videos. This maternal figure differs sharply from their own mothers, even though both share the absence of a father figure. The “mommy” respects her children’s personal boundaries, promising not to enter their rooms without permission.³³¹ She also values their opinions, recalling her daughter’s wish to visit Tahiti.³³² More importantly, she remains consistently gentle, tolerant, and sensitive to her children’s emotions, never pressuring them about grades. When her daughter receives a B in physics, she expresses reassurance rather than disappointment, saying, “I saw your effort, and you faced the challenge with courage”, “I’m not like other Asian parents — I never demand straight ‘A’ exam results”, and “I think you did a wonderful job”.³³³ When her children grow anxious as the holiday draws to a close, she comforts them with affirmations such as, “You’ve already done great”, and “You can become whatever you want to be”.³³⁴

³³⁰ Chizuko Ueno, *Fuquanzhi yu ziben zhuyi*, 2.

³³¹ Bacardiiaiaia, “Shaoye xingyixing yaoqu shang mashu le.”

³³² Bacardiiaiaia, “Angelina gongzhu, qichuang chi oumu dan la!”

³³³ Bacardiiaiaia, “Angelina you yidiandian kaode buhao ye meiguanxi! [Angelina, it’s okay if you don’t do so well a little! Angelina, 有一点点考的不好也没关系!],” Douyin, April 21, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/ZLmTIp3tR7k/>.

³³⁴ Bacardiiaiaia, “Adrian fangjian de yongchi ni call yixia guanxia jiejie mafan ta qing ren lai qingli yixia [Adrian, call the housekeeper to ask her to have someone clean the pool in your room, Adrian 房间的泳池你 call 一下管家姐姐 麻烦她请人

For many Chinese girls who have been driven toward perfection from an early age, such unconditional love and affirmation from a mother is something they have never known yet long deeply to receive. The emotional deprivation experienced in childhood does not vanish with maturity; rather, it lingers into adulthood. As Furuichi Masako notes, even though this generation of young women has succeeded in the *gaokao*, obtained stable employment, and achieved financial independence, the pressure upon them has scarcely eased.³³⁵ Those daughters who received higher education are precisely the ones most exposed to diverse worldviews and progressive feminist ideas, shaping their independent values and aspirations.³³⁶

However, these newfound ideals frequently collide with their parents' expectations, and this conflict becomes especially pronounced in adulthood.³³⁷ Despite their strong commitment to education, many parents continue to uphold traditional beliefs about what defines an "ideal life". They urge their daughters to find secure employment in their hometowns and to marry and have children.³³⁸ Sons, by contrast, are more often encouraged to pursue ambitious careers in major cities and are not pressured to marry as early.³³⁹ This ongoing conflict between personal ambition and familial duty (intensified by persistent gender inequality in the workplace) creates a sense of chronic anxiety among many young women. For them, hearing words of comfort from a fictional maternal figure and sharing their emotions within the "mommy's" online community offer a temporary but meaningful form of

来清理一下],” Douyin, March 22, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, https://v.douyin.com/zL7IV3Su_i8/.

³³⁵ Furuichi Masako, “Weihe dangjin zhongguo chuxianle yigu shangye qianhezi re?”

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*, 3.

³³⁸ Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, 10th anniversary ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 21.

³³⁹ Ibid., 33.

solace, allowing them to momentarily escape their own burdens.

Interestingly, before becoming a popular creator, Bacardiiiiiii once uploaded a short video that revealed only her sorrowful face accompanied by a few lines of text:

“I argued with my parents again about making videos. My mom said what I post is all low-energy stuff... I’ve always loved them, but their desire for control is just like that of most Chinese parents. The patriarchal family structure deeply rooted in our culture makes me feel powerless”.³⁴⁰

The woman who created the old money mommy, a figure that has brought comfort and warmth to countless young women of her generation, was, in fact, the first to be healed by her own creation. She embodies the emotional strain faced by young women entangled in intergenerational conflict. Beneath the comedic façade of imitation lies the collective anxiety of a generation of women burdened by greater social and academic expectations than their male peers, yet deprived of unconditional affection within their families. Under such pressure, some follow paths dictated entirely by parental will, living lives that feel foreign to them. Others sever ties and choose solitude in distant cities. Many more, like Bacardiiiiiii herself, remain suspended between filial obligation and personal longing — loving their parents deeply, yet feeling confined by their control.

Revisiting the old money mommy series invites reflection on why this idealized mother is envisioned as a woman from an affluent, long-established family. Does unconditional love depend upon financial security? If happiness for a daughter is imagined as contingent upon

³⁴⁰ Bacardiiiiiii, “Xixi bu xixi [Hehe or Not Hehe, 嘻嘻不嘻嘻],” Douyin, August 5, 2024, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/x-rrs58unOI/>.

inherited privilege (i.e. freedom from competition, judgment, and fear of failure) what does that suggest for daughters from ordinary households who remain trapped in cycles of pressure and perfectionism imposed by family and society? Moreover, the mommy's ability to provide stability and emotional warmth after divorce rests upon her financial independence. For women in middle- and lower-income families, especially full-time homemakers, divorce often results in economic vulnerability, leaving them unable to sustain themselves or their children. If genuine love and freedom can only exist through "rebirth" into an old-money lineage, then the persistence of structural gender inequality becomes starkly apparent.

Much like the audiences of the greasy man imitation videos, women who watch the Old Money Mommy series experience momentary relief from their own pain and frustration. Within the shared laughter of this online community, they find fleeting comfort, though such humor ultimately cannot resolve the structural tensions it portrays. Even so, creators like Bacardi — who subtly integrate feminist consciousness into accessible, humorous performances featuring complex and empathetic women characters — may be viewed as engaging in a quiet yet meaningful act of resistance, challenging the pervasive sense of powerlessness that defines their social condition.

While the emergence and development of comedy that moves beyond traditional misogynistic frameworks is indeed encouraging, it must also be recognized that comedies adhering to the old patriarchal humor system — including imitation comedy — continue to exist and even flourish, often attracting stable audiences and substantial popularity. Many of

their creators are, in fact, women. A recurring trope in these performances is the demonization of women labeled as “bitches” or “homewreckers”, who are portrayed as manipulative figures seducing men and destroying relationships. These women are often imitated for their manner of speech, tone, and gestures, yet the same critical attention is rarely directed toward the men who engage in infidelity. For instance, influencer Liu Yuxi (刘羽兮) created a widely viewed video that categorizes and imitates various types of so-called “bitchy” women.³⁴¹ One type is depicted as “pretending to be gentle and considerate”, flattering men while offering “insincere” compliments to other women. Another is characterized as tomboyish and outspoken, addressing men as “bros” and claiming to be “one of the guys”. Performances of this kind reinforce misogynistic narratives that pit women against one another in competition for male attention and validation.

Furthermore, such labeling risks unfairly stigmatizing women, since being soft-spoken, easygoing, or confident does not necessarily imply manipulation or immoral behavior. Despite this, the video released in July 2025 still accumulated more than 50,000 likes. Similarly, some impression comedies use rivalry and deception among women celebrities as their primary theme. For example, Baibian Xixi (百变熹熹)’s performance portrays several women attempting in every possible way to outshine one another in front of the camera.³⁴² These portrayals suggest that whenever women gather, they inevitably compete for fame, wealth, or men rather than form genuine bonds of friendship or solidarity.

³⁴¹ Liu Yuxi (刘羽兮, @xj3999), “Ni men shenbian you hanzi cha ma? [Do you have tomboy bitch nearby? 你们身边有汉子茶吗?],” Douyin, July 2, 2025, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/mFfRSsMjLQ/>.

³⁴² Baibian Xixi (百变熹熹, @cchuli527), “Butong kawei nvxing ruhe qiang C wei... suoyi shei ying le? [Different-ranking actresses competing for the center spot... so who won? 不同咖位女星如何抢 C 位...所以谁赢了?],” Douyin, September 7, 2023, accessed October 3, 2025, video, <https://v.douyin.com/KYRyPSptqls/>.

Until substantial change occurs within patriarchal cultural structures, gender-discriminatory comedies are likely to persist. Many creators remain confined within misogynistic assumptions, often without conscious awareness. These works coexist alongside comedies that attempt to challenge gender bias, together forming a multifaceted ecosystem of women's comedic production — one that reflects both progress and lingering constraints.

Conclusion

This thesis uses selected representative creators and their works as case studies to examine how women on Douyin imitate both men and women in a humorous way. Both categories emerge from the same sociocultural condition: a society in which patriarchal power remains deeply entrenched while feminist consciousness and new discourses on gender equality are gaining visibility. The analysis has explored how women creators have found and established their positions within humor regimes long dominated by patriarchal norms, gradually unsettling old structures and producing new forms of content, new characters, and even new worldviews. Although rooted in popular culture and short-video entertainment, these works carry significant implications for understanding gender issues in contemporary China.

Women's imitation of greasy men constitutes a powerful act of social commentary. Through humor and mimicry, women creators dismantle the authority of the male voice and the sanctity of masculine dignity that have long dominated the Chinese humor regime. Their exaggerated performances expose the fragility of patriarchal masculinity and bring to light the everyday microaggressions women endure, such as mansplaining, condescension, entitlement, and moral hypocrisy. Laughter, in this context, becomes a political gesture: by laughing at men rather than being laughed at, women reclaim a measure of agency that has been historically denied to them. However, this empowerment remains ambivalent. The humor that enables women to laugh together also underscores their collective pain. The very act of joking about greasy men is born from experiences of discomfort, exploitation, and control. It offers temporary catharsis but cannot yet transform structural inequality. Especially

when these imitation videos face strict censorship, it becomes evident how patriarchal authority exerts public power to suppress women's voices of rebellion. The laughter, therefore, serves as a relief, not a resolution.

The second chapter focuses on women's character impression comedy of women on Douyin. Here, women humor begins to detach itself from the patriarchal logic of misogyny. This creative tendency coincides with the "Ueno Chizuko fever" and the renewed discussions of misogyny among Chinese audiences after 2022. Influenced by Ueno's insight that misogyny also manifests as women's self-hatred, many women creators consciously avoid reproducing the harmful tropes that have long shaped women characters in comedy, such as the jealous friend, the rude rural wife, or the beautiful woman without independent thought. In their place emerge portrayals imbued with empathy, affection, and introspection. Through imitation, these creators reclaim the right to define womanhood, transforming comedy from a tool of ridicule into a medium of recognition.

The paradigm of "woman as the first sex" analyzed in the chapter illustrates this shift. Creators like Gugumi and Xiaoxiao Xuejie construct women-centered micro-worlds where women occupy all social positions, children, teachers, mothers, and friends, without requiring men's participation to complete the narrative. In these spaces, womanhood ceases to be a marked, exceptional identity; it becomes the unspoken norm, the human default. By depicting women as independent subjects or agents rather than relational beings or "Others" defined through men, such comedies break another chain within the patriarchal humor regime and create a new space filled with openness and possibility. Unlike the greasy-man trend, which directly mocked male privilege, these videos do not express overt resistance. Their feminist

potential lies not in confrontation but in quiet normalization, in showing women simply existing, speaking, and being humorous without apology or shyness. In this sense, the women-centered humor on Douyin may not directly dismantle power structures, but it gently erodes them by envisioning alternative emotional and social relations.

The character of the old money single mommy imitated by Bacardiiaiiiiii further enriches this ecology. Her humorous monologues about equality, independence, and respect for others articulate feminist values through the language of tenderness. Viewers' responses — many addressing her as “mommy” and sharing their personal emotions — reveal that her appeal lies less in fantasy of wealth than in a longing for emotional security. The figure of the cyber mother embodies both love from the internet and the sorrow of reality, echoing the generational experiences of women who grew up under the one-child policy. The expectations, discrimination, and oppression borne by this generation of women have led them to now seek maternal warmth in virtual spaces. This phenomenon demonstrates how comedy, while entertaining, can also serve as a collective mode of healing, giving emotional form to unspoken social anxieties.

These two chapters embody the dual nature of humor. Its darker side conveys anger, dissatisfaction, or disdain, using ridicule to strike at the dignity of the target, who can seldom react gracefully. Its brighter side offers relief, empathy, care, and warmth, gathering a community of mutual understanding through laughter. Women's humor can draw strength from both sides, mocking the patriarchal order that oppresses them while also encouraging and caring for other women.

At the same time, the limitations of online feminist humor remain evident. Its ambiguity and lack of overt seriousness allow it to survive and even flourish within the discursive control of patriarchy more easily than direct forms of expression. It is this quality that also limits its transformative potential. Humor expresses anger and exposes contradictions through laughter, yet it also turns resistance against injustice into a form of entertainment. While this enables feminist ideas to reach broader audiences, it also risks neutralizing their critical power. As a result, online feminist humor often occupies an ambivalent position: it resists and adapts at once, revealing both the creativity and the constraints of women's self-expression under patriarchal governance.

The evolution of women's impression comedy on Douyin reveals a double movement: it is at once a symptom of and a response to the contradictions of gender in contemporary China. These videos are not merely products of entertainment algorithms but part of an ongoing negotiation between feminism and misogyny, self-expression and censorship, laughter and pain. By laughing at men, women begin to release resentment; by laughing with women, they begin to imagine solidarity. The humor that emerges from this process is therefore both personal and political—a form of everyday feminist practice that affirms women's capacity to speak, to laugh, and to create meaning in a society still marked by inequality.

Due to space limitations, this thesis cannot fully encompass the wide variety of women's impression comedies, and there may inevitably be omissions. For instance, some works situated at the intersection of misogyny and feminism reveal the subtle emotional complexity of both admiration and mockery in imitations of women celebrities and influencers. Moreover, the overlaps between women's humor and queer humor remain to be further explored, as

lesbian humor in China faces even stricter censorship and thus particularly draws my research interest.

Ultimately, this thesis represents only the beginning of my academic journey. As a Chinese woman, an only daughter living and studying far from home, I have laughed at these imitation videos, grown angry together with other viewers, and been touched by their warmth. I will continue to follow this genre of humor—not only as a researcher but also as a participant and audience member. My hope is that Chinese women will continue to move forward on the path of comedy, going ever farther, ever better, and ever freer.

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